

# Capitalistic Recuperation: The Spectacle of Performative Progressivism in Hip Hop

Lee Murkey\*  
Andrea N. Hunt<sup>+</sup>

*This article explores the state of mainstream Hip Hop and the rhetoric of consumption that is so persuasive today. We begin with a discussion of the educational system and how it functions as an ideological state apparatus to propagate capitalism as a benevolent ideological foundation. This propagation is a form of control that helps maintain the status quo. We describe the dehumanization and alienation within the educational system using a Freirean perspective. The article ends with a critical analysis of the process of capitalistic recuperation in Hip Hop and how this operates within the spectacle as described by Guy Debord.*

**Keywords:** Hip Hop; Consumption; Paulo Freire; Spectacle

In New York City during the summer of 1977, two lightning strikes to an electricity transmission line caused a city-wide blackout. Blackouts were nothing new in New York City, and most of them did not incite panic or chaos, but something was different this time: the entire city was hurting. The Son of Sam serial killer was still at large, the crime rate was rising, and the city was in the midst of a severe financial crisis. Unlike the calm response to the previous blackout of 1965, this event sparked complete pandemonium. There were reports that people looted sixteen hundred stores, set over 1,000 fires, and law enforcement made over 4,000 arrests. Post blackout, the streets were flooded with DJs, and more DJs meant more emcees and more opportunities to reach the people. For instance, DJ Grandmaster Caz, a DJ from the Bronx, went to a store he had previously bought some equipment from and stole a mixer. Later in an interview talking about that time, Caz said, “After the blackout, all this new wealth...was found by people, and they just - opportunity sprang from that. And you could see the differences before the blackout and after.”<sup>1</sup> Caz believes that this newfound access to equipment helped accelerate the already growing culture of Hip Hop. This was a revolutionary boost for Hip Hop as an art form.

Five years after the blackout, on July 1, 1982, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released “The Message.” The song centers on the perspectives of oppressed inner-city Black people, effectively lending a voice to the previously unheard. The song addresses the deteriorating conditions of the inner-city ghettos and the alienation that Black youth feel in the school system. Black artists moved Hip Hop beyond its party-driven infancy just five years after the resources to expand the

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\* \* Lee Murkey is a Hip Hop artist, painter, published illustrator, and independent scholar from Florence, Alabama. The author can be reached by email at [leemurkeyt@aol.com](mailto:leemurkeyt@aol.com).

<sup>+</sup> Andrea N. Hunt is an Associate Professor of Sociology and the Director of the Mitchell-West Center for Social Inclusion at the University of North Alabama. The author can be reached by email at [ahunt3@una.edu](mailto:ahunt3@una.edu).

<sup>1</sup> DJ Grandmaster Caz, “Lights Out,” *99% Invisible*, 2014, accessed July 26, 2020, <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/lights-out/>.

art form were effectively democratized in a calamitous situation where the people seized the means of production. This shows the revolutionary potential of the art form.

In this paper, we explore the absorption of mainstream Hip Hop and the rhetoric of consumption that is so persuasive today. This first requires a discussion of the educational system, which functions as an ideological state apparatus that can propagate capitalism as a benevolent ideological foundation rather than a system distinguishable from the human experience.<sup>2</sup> This propagation is a form of control that directly helps maintain the status quo. Next, we describe the process of recuperation in Hip Hop and how this operates within the spectacle, which extends the dehumanization experienced within the educational system. The emphasis on hyper-consumption has prevented the development of a class consciousness, and it keeps people focused on having rather than being. Within this codified existence lies a real alienation for Hip Hop artists – from self, others, and culture, and the capitalist system needs that alienation to survive and thrive.

### **The Educational System and Second-Order Illiteracy**

The word education has a two-part Latin etymological root, starting with “educare,” which roughly means to train or to mold and “educere” meaning to lead out. These two dissonant root meanings help highlight the clash at the very center of our current educational system. The former (educare) prioritizes memorization and habitual training, while the latter (educere) prioritizes critical thought, curiosity, and creative engagement with a set of issues. These differences are foundational and irreconcilable. No one explored these differences better than Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he distinguished between the banking method of education and the dialogical problem-posing method.

Compulsory schooling in the United States has historically been based on what Freire recognized as the banking model, where, as he explains, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.”<sup>3</sup> The educare centered approach favors tradition and firm adherence to the current hierarchical structure in Western society. The success of students and teachers hinges on their ability to maintain the status quo at all costs. Moreover, with the promise of advancement held as the reward, the maintenance of this approach is measured in a strict grading system, the rigidity of which offers no room to analyze the problems being used to test the students critically. This effectively promotes good memorization skills and adherence to the rules as key factors in problem-solving. Students are forced into an authoritarian pedagogical dichotomy with little to no agency, with the teacher positioned as the sole holder and disseminator of information. Again, this mimics the current hierarchical structure in society and often leads to intellectual passivity, which can disproportionately affect the youth of color who already feel marginalized in the educational system. It teaches students to conform rather than rebel or question the very framework of their reality. Many see education as the means for social mobility and a way to alter life circumstances. Still, this narrative contradicts the dominant method of teaching that does not fully allow the critical examination of education as a social institution by students or teachers who inhabit this social space.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 1970. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster, *Monthly Review Press*, 1971. We focus on how capitalism creates a system of education that promotes passivity and conformity. For a broader discussion of capitalism, see Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955); and Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (1970; repr., New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 72.

In contrast, dialogical and problem-posing education eliminates the student-teacher contradiction. Gone is the teacher as the all-knowing authoritarian, while the students are just empty vessels. This method democratizes the classroom and recognizes the students and teachers as equals, pursuing one common goal through communication. In Freire's words, "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the students and the students-of-the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers."<sup>4</sup> Dialogue ('dia' meaning "in between" and 'logue/légein' meaning "to speak") is inherently inclusive, thus facilitating a critical engagement with and an investigation of any given set of issues. This includes the very structure of the reality that the teacher-students exist in, representing a threat to the hierarchical structure accepted as self-evident in the banking method. The educere centered approach is revolutionary in every sense of the word.

Second-order illiteracy is the condition of not reading, watching, listening to or observing, and critically engaging the subtextual or aesthetic value of something.<sup>5</sup> This is not to be confused with functional illiteracy, which means lacking the basic reading and writing skills needed to manage daily living and basic employment. Second-order illiteracy is the standard in American society. It results from the nihilistic dismissal of incomprehension (i.e., the failure to understand something) as unessential in the learning process.<sup>6</sup> As high-stakes testing has increased and is used as an indicator of school success (and thus school funding), incomprehension and, by extension, inquiry has little room in the curriculum. Incomprehension can be used as an entry point to encourage a deep and challenging engagement of a given subject through a dialogical investigation of the specific properties that previously made the subject impenetrable. This can eventually lead to a genuine grasp and appreciation of what was once too complicated and challenging to understand. Substantially increasing the difficulty of the material being used in the classroom with each grade level is daunting. This requires the students to confront specific linguistic, thematic, psychological, sociological, philosophical, and societal observations outside of their intellectual purview. It also asks their educators – who are usually overworked, overwhelmed, and underpaid – to do the same in an environment with built-in systemic disincentives for such an approach. According to Freire,

And since people "receive" the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better "fit" for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.<sup>7</sup>

Second-order illiteracy is further promoted and strengthened by the entertainment industry. The general public accepts current media as a benevolent form of escapism. In reality, this industry – bolstered by the advent of social media – has fully merged with and has become virtually indistinguishable from "authentic life." Accepting industrialized mass entertainment as a valid form of requiring a level of passivity that is made possible by second-order illiteracy and life under late capitalism.<sup>8</sup> This passivity is paradoxical in that it behaves as both cause and effect when observing

<sup>4</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Michael Lipson, "In Praise of Illiteracy," *Grand Street* 5, no. 4 (1986): 88-96.

<sup>6</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, 79. The banking method of education focuses on receiving information from a teacher who is seen as all-knowing and does not promote the critical examination of students' reality. In contrast, liberating education centers on cognition and critical thinking rather than the transfer of information.

<sup>7</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Gerben Bakker, "How Motion Pictures Industrialized Entertainment," *The Journal of Economic History* 72, no. 4 (2012): 1036-1063. Industrialized mass entertainment results from the growth in commercialized entertainment

our mass submission to this state of existence. This process makes Hip Hop a part of industrialized mass entertainment, a tool of unconscious dehumanization by reinforcing the oppressive actions and principles it once stood against in its counter-cultural infancy.

### Dehumanization and Alienation

The lack of intellectually stimulating art is the product of a system built to mirror its parent ideology – neoliberalism – that refers to a system that values “competition” above all other conceptions of economic rationality. As this logic relates to the arts, specifically Hip Hop music, this competition over everything approach is especially harmful because it hinges on faulty oversimplified supply and demand principles. In reality, it is nonsensical to create music to play as broadly as possible and then push this music relentlessly (with unlimited resources), just to turn around and use the nearly inevitable monetary success of that music as proof of its artistic value. The artists outside of this system who create truthful and original work get shunned. They are ignored either actively by the system itself through label practices or passively by the audiences who have been conditioned to exclusively listen to what is produced and promoted by the industry executives.

In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, Zadie Smith likened the role of the reader to that of an amateur musician reading a sheet of music, the idea being that “It can only give you what you put into it,”<sup>9</sup> and the same is true for a Hip Hop listener. Zadie Smith further says, “good reading is an analogy of good living...those procedures are vital, they’re really important to becoming a human being. Becoming a human being isn’t just something you get with your birth, it’s exercise and it takes your whole life.”<sup>10</sup> The very structure of the system discourages and makes all but impossible the process of humanization through ‘good reading’ or, in this case, ‘good listening,’ making the maintenance of this system an act of dehumanization. According to Freire, “dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human.”<sup>11</sup> The oppressor who is conscious of their position as the oppressor refuses to acknowledge the humanity of the oppressed. In doing so, the oppressor inadvertently reaffirms the humanity in the oppressed by trying to preserve its exclusivity for themselves.

In Hip Hop, the system as an amalgamation of several moving parts shaped by capitalism is the oppressor. Since an abstraction cannot make conscious decisions, the humanization process is stifled by the constant need for profit and power. This process effectively bypasses a scenario in which the humanity of the oppressed is ever reaffirmed and therefore kills any possibility of the dehumanized recognizing what has been stolen from them because what has been stolen has almost no place in the outward facing appearance of the oppressive system. The oppressor also promotes a recency bias regarding substance by aggressively dismissing the longing for the pursuit of freedom present in the early days of Hip Hop as close-minded dismissals of youthful progression. The reason substance is specifically highlighted is because it has become common practice to sonically reuse what has come before to cynically cash in on blind nostalgia under the guise of homage while completely disregarding the substance of whatever is being stolen.

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throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century that integrated local and regional entertainment networks into national networks. Within a leisure society, there is more demand for entertainment and the focus shifts to productivity through automation and standardization.

<sup>9</sup> Zadie Smith, “Zadie Smith: “On Beauty,”” *KCRW Podcast*, 2006, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/zadie-smith-on-beauty>.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, “Zadie Smith: “On Beauty.””

<sup>11</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, 40.

## The Spectacle and Hip Hop

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord suggests that “when culture becomes nothing more than a commodity, it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society.”<sup>12</sup> Hip Hop is the most popular genre of music today and is the main contributor to the current pop culture Zeitgeist, informing everything from everyday language to fashion and taste.<sup>13</sup> At first glance, this may seem like a great accomplishment because the genre is a legitimate spoken art with sophisticated aesthetics and themes. Within the confines of the spectacle, the refined and potentially revolutionary characteristics of the art form are robbed of their emancipatory capabilities, reducing what once was the voice of the voiceless down to a series of commodified images.<sup>14</sup> Challenging aesthetics can be emancipatory because they require incomprehension and real contemplative thought to be appreciated.<sup>15</sup> Subversive themes such as anti-capitalist subject matter or deep criticisms of hierarchical structures can be emancipatory because they can at the very least plant the necessary seeds needed to begin investigating oppressive societies and systems. The spectacle is the immune system of late capitalism, eliminating each threat to its current cultural dominance. Its primary weapon is recuperation, the process by which revolutionary and radical ideas, movements, and artistic modes of expression are absorbed, co-opted, defused, commodified, and re-appropriated to benefit the very system they once had the potential to reform or abolish.<sup>16</sup>

On June 30, 2017, Jay-Z released his critically acclaimed and Grammy-nominated hit “The Story of O.J.” The song criticizes controversial sports icon O.J. Simpson for downplaying his race and aggrandizing his celebrity status. In his infamous quote, Simpson stated, “I’m not Black, I’m O.J.,” to which Jay-Z slyly responds, “...okay,” hinting at a lesson Simpson would learn the hard way – that his success and status would not save him from his blackness.<sup>17</sup> The song’s chorus is an attempt to highlight the illusionary separation(s) between Blacks, saying “light n-, dark n-, faux n-, real n-, rich n-, po’ nigga, house n-, field n-,” and then following up these differences with “still n-.”<sup>18</sup> The idea of illusionary differences is a reference to the song NO I.D., sampled for the beat, which is Nina Simone’s “Four Women.”<sup>19</sup> Jay-Z’s critique would be profound if the rest of the

<sup>12</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1972), Thesis 193.

<sup>13</sup> Neilson’s 2017 *U.S. Music Year-End Report* identified Hip Hop as the most popular genre of music with seven of the 10 most consumed albums falling with the genre. <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2018/2017-music-us-year-end-report/#>. Zeitgeist refers to the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time.

<sup>14</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 193. Debord uses the concept of the spectacle to refer to the autocratic reign of the market economy.

<sup>15</sup> Aesthetics can be used in two ways: 1) beauty or the appreciation of beauty and 2) principles underlying the work of a particular artist or artistic movement. We use the latter definition in this paper.

<sup>16</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 193; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 113. Ed Guerrero describes how this process of recuperation can be seen in Black cinema throughout the 1980s where many Black films were based on caricatures and stereotypes, Black actors were devalued, and the Black image was resubordinated. The cinema of recuperation did not challenge the spectator-consumer, thus, not addressing issues of race, class, and gender inequality.

<sup>17</sup> Jay-Z includes this quote from O.J. Simpson as one of his song lyrics in “The Story of O.J.” Jay-Z, “The Story of O.J.,” *YouTube*, uploaded July 15, 2017 and accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM71w0Ovzq0>.

<sup>18</sup> Jay-Z, “The Story of O.J.,” 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Nina Simone, “Four Women,” *YouTube*, 1966, uploaded February 9, 2013 and accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgoRc3GoXo8>. “Four Women” is Nina Simone’s tribute to the four young girls who were killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Jay-Z has very plainly

song did not contradict it. After Jay-Z refers to O.J. as a “house n-,” he immediately labels himself a “field n-,” to illustrate an apparent distinction between himself and O.J. that directly contradicts the idea he developed so well in the chorus right before it. Jay Z never goes back to this distinction between himself and O.J. to invalidate it; purposely, he goes on to say, “Go and play the quarters, where the butlers be, imma play the corners where the hustlers be.”<sup>20</sup> This further dichotomizes the house and field, the latter being favorable in Jay-Z’s eyes.

The problem with this dichotomy is the fact that it simply shows two sides of the same coin. Whether it is the Black athlete who believes his wealth and success outweigh the significance of his blackness or a Black drug dealer on the corner whose vocation is structurally identical to the very system of capitalism that treats Black oppression as a necessity, they are both serving the same master – capital. No matter how successful their approach makes them, neither is willing to challenge the invisible antagonist of white supremacy. The comparison between Jay-Z and O.J. Simpson is a false dichotomy. The song is not a profound self-critique but a failure to acknowledge the pervasive reach of capitalism, a system to which Jay-Z adheres tightly.

Moreover, re-appropriating Nina Simone’s revolutionary song about the misogynistic and racist oppression of Black women to serve as the instrumental backdrop for this song is capitalist recuperation in every sense of the concept. Patriarchal dominance is a symptom of a society built to serve late capitalism, and as bell hooks said, “Insistence on patriarchal values, or equating black liberation with black men gaining access to male privilege that would enable them to assert power over black women, was one of the most significant forces undermining radical struggle.”<sup>21</sup> The spectacular use of a revolutionary, anti-misogynist/anti-racist song to serve the purpose of an aesthetic backdrop for a song full of capitalist rhetoric exposes the anti-revolutionary function of the spectacle.

On August 13, 2019, Jay-Z and the National Football League’s (NFL) Commissioner, Roger Goodell, announced a partnership between Roc Nation and the NFL. This deal meant that Jay-Z’s Roc Nation Company would “advise on the selection of artists for major NFL performances like the Super Bowl.”<sup>22</sup> They announced the deal two years after NFL teams decided not to hire Colin Kaepernick in response to his protest of police brutality after he became a free agent in 2017. This partnership positioned Jay-Z as the new face of social justice for the NFL. It created the image of progressivism for an organization made up of owners who despised Kaepernick’s protest enough to end his career.<sup>23</sup> In the press conference held by Jay-Z and Roger Goodell, a reporter asked Jay-Z whether he would kneel or stand during the National Anthem. He responded, “I think we’ve passed kneeling...I think it’s time to go into our actionable items...I think everyone knows what the issue is, we’re done with that.”<sup>24</sup> He further stated that this initiative would serve as the next

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stated his desire to replace those we view as oppressors. On stage at a Tidal event Jay-Z said “You know I came in this game independent right? TIDAL, my own label, same difference / Oh ni- is skeptical when it’s their own shit / You bought nine I-phones and Steve Jobs was rich / Phil Knight worth trillions and you still bought those kicks!” Jay-Z shows his willingness to step in as a sub-oppressor, which should come as no surprise.

<sup>20</sup> Jay-Z, “The Story of O.J.,” 2017.

<sup>21</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 16.

<sup>22</sup> NFL.com, “Jay-Z’s Roc Nation entering Partnership with NFL,” *Around the NFL*, 2019, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.nfl.com/news/jay-z-s-roc-nation-entering-partnership-with-nfl-0ap3000001041162>.

<sup>23</sup> Kaepernick finally received an undisclosed settlement from the NFL.

<sup>24</sup> Peyton Blakemore, “Jay-Z Says We’re Past Kneeling After Signing NFL Deal, Celebs & Fans React,” iHeartRADIO, 2019, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.iheart.com/content/2019-08-15-jay-z-says-were-past-kneeling-after-signing-nfl-deal-celebs-fans-react/>.

step. His answer brings precisely what the spectacle does to the forefront: to use images to mediate all modes of meaningful human interaction and protect capital.

Another fundamental disconnect in Jay-Z's answer was the idea that 'we all know what the problem is,' implying a homogenous awareness of the sociopolitical conditions surrounding the issue of police brutality when he has proven not to understand them. Seven months before announcing his partnership with NFL, Jay-Z was on a panel with Robert Kraft (the owner of The Patriots football team) and said that Black men have "an adverse feeling for authority" due to being raised in single-parent households.<sup>25</sup> His comment implies that attitudes, when carried into interactions with the police, lead to more brutality. While this fundamental misunderstanding is baseless, it does not matter in the spectacle. What matters is the absorption and subsequent sterilization of the message Colin Kaepernick tried to present. Instead of Americans being forced to deal with what Colin Kaepernick's protest was about, or the fact that he lost his career over it, they can passively consume a Jay-Z curated Super Bowl half-time show, which J. Lo and Shakira headlined.<sup>26</sup>

### *Spectacular Consumption*

Eric King Watts uses this notion of spectacle as a theoretical lens to analyze rap music. He suggests that rappers become the spectacle when their persona becomes bigger than their artistry.<sup>27</sup> The spectacle happens when the commodity (i.e., the artist) has attained the total occupation of social life. The commodification of artists creates what Watts refers to as "spectacular consumption."<sup>28</sup> This process involves strategies of self-promotion that alter and are altered by the interdependence among private, public, and economic spheres. The rise of the Hip Hop mogul in the mid to late 1990s created an illusion of social mobility for young disenfranchised Black men rather than sustainable structural changes to address economic marginalization.<sup>29</sup> The imagery of the mogul today in popular culture often focuses on consumption and a lavish lifestyle that encourages youth to follow suit. It creates a false consciousness that prevents young artists from truly seeing their social and economic situations.<sup>30</sup> The 1990s Hip Hop mogul attained career success and notoriety under a different context than artists today who are more spectacle in the age of social media. Two examples illustrate the spectacle within current social conditions – DaBaby and J Cole.

<sup>25</sup> An overview of the panel is provided by Newsone in "Jay-Z's Words Come Back To Haunt Him As His NFL Social Justice Initiative Disappoints," *Newsone*, 2019, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://newsone.com/3885813/jay-z-social-justice-video-nfl-deal/>.

<sup>26</sup> Right before the publication of this essay, the NFL announced that Dr. Dre will produce the Super Bowl halftime show on February 13, 2022 and will feature "living Hip Hop legends Kendrick Lamar, Eminem, Mary J. Blige, and Snoop Dogg." See Jessica Sager's "Dre! Snoop! Em! Mary J! Everything to Know About the 2022 Super Bowl Halftime Show Performers and More," *Parade Magazine*, October 4, 2021, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://parade.com/1271942/jessicasager/super-bowl-halftime-show-2022/>.

<sup>27</sup> Eric K. Watts, "An Exploration of Spectacular Consumption: Gangsta Rap as Cultural Commodity," *Communication Studies* 48, no. 1 (1997): 42-58. For a discussion on the spectacle, see Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 193.

<sup>28</sup> Watts, *Communication Studies* 48, no. 1 (1997): 42-58.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Holmes Smith, "'I Don't Like to Dream about Getting Paid': Representation of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul," *Social Text* 21, no. 4 (2003): 69-97.

<sup>30</sup> Marx suggested that before workers can develop a class consciousness they live with a false consciousness. This is the idea that people view themselves as individuals in competition with others over social and economic status rather than seeing collective social and economic interests characterized by experiences and struggles. False consciousness results from commodity fetishism. Marx described this in *Das Kapital, A Critique of Political Economy*, (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1959), and *The Communist Manifesto*, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955).

Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, in broad daylight on May 25th, 2020, during an arrest for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. The nation watched as protests broke out immediately after the video of Floyd's murder surfaced, with the overwhelming majority of them being peaceful.<sup>31</sup> The demonstrations grew into a large-scale movement with global solidarity. The unavoidable significance of this movement, coupled with the fact that a pandemic slowed down life and limited distractions enough to pay attention to what's happening around us, enabled activists to bring issues of abolition, defunding the police, ending qualified immunity, no-knock warrants, and dismantling systemic racism to the forefront of public discourse. Radical ideas being discussed in the mainstream media and regularly on social media would, at first thought, seem to be advantageous for Hip Hop. Still, the profoundly capitalist, neo-liberal philosophical foundation of the culture in its current form has disallowed any real artistic exploration(s) to take place.

Hip Hop fans across the nation took to social media demanding their favorite artists speak up and use their platforms to help the movement by providing exposure for bail funds and personally donating to the various highlighted causes. In response to this outcry, South Carolina Rapper DaBaby tweeted on May 31, 2020:

I always sit back and let the hype blow over before I give my insight, so my perspective don't get confused with all the ppl who only speak for likes & comments, or to save face, or maybe because their PR department, label, or management told em they should make a statement in order to preserve their integrity & not lose fans, business, support from the black community, etc.<sup>32</sup>

A little less than a month later, at the BET Awards on June 28, 2020, DaBaby premiered a performance video titled "The Black Lives Matter Rockstar Remix." DaBaby plays an obvious stand-in for George Floyd in this video, recreating Floyd's brutal murder as he raps directly into the camera with a police officer's knee on his neck. DaBaby's new "Black Lives Matter" verse details his own personal run-ins with law enforcement until there's a sudden hard cut to a beautiful shot of clouds that imply his death. DaBaby followed this by a reenactment of a violent riot, which persists for the remainder of the video.

DaBaby raps exclusively from his own perspective as a misunderstood but successful and wealthy Black Rockstar. He does not offer any insight into the more significant systemic issues and fails to show empathy for the man's death that he aestheticizes in the video. The "Black Lives Matter" addition is 46 seconds long, which may be a subtle nod to George Floyd. The song focuses on meeting any and all threats to one's safety, which is indistinguishable from one's wealth in this context, with extreme lethal force. The video was released in the middle of a real-life civil rights movement. Rather than using this platform to show the long and varied history of Black resistance – which George Yancy describes as "a history of resistance throughout the Diaspora by people of African descent"<sup>33</sup> - DaBaby takes images of Black oppression and uses them as costumes to dress up a platitudinous and vapid expression of the mainstream "to be is to have."<sup>34</sup> DaBaby, and by

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<sup>31</sup> See ACLED, *Demonstrations and Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer 2020*, September 2020, accessed October 17, 2021, <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/>.

<sup>32</sup> DaBaby, May 31, 2020, 11:51 a.m., <https://twitter.com/dababydababy/status/1267136755930664961?lang=en>.

<sup>33</sup> George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 118.

<sup>34</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, 58. Freire suggests that "to be is to have," which means that money is the measure of all things and profit is the primary goal.



extension BET, put forth images of real trauma that commodified Black bodies and Black suffering for the white gaze. [Transition]

J. Cole, one of Hip Hop's leading "conscious" artists, debuted his single "Snow on tha Bluff" on June 16, 2020. The song is jarring because, at the very *least*, one would expect an emotional indictment of police brutality and systemic racism similar to Cole's 2014 triumph "Be Free." On the contrary, instead of addressing police brutality and issues facing Black and oppressed people head-on, Cole directly confronts the tone of an educated Black woman on recent social media posts. Hip Hop artist Noname, fed up with perceived inaction and silence of so-called leaders in the Hip Hop industry who have built careers on the image of being empathetic and conscious artists, tweeted:

Poor black folks all over the country are putting their bodies on the line in protest for our collective safety and y'all favorite top selling rappers not even willing to put a tweet up" and "n\*ggas whole discographies be about black plight and they nowhere to be found.<sup>35</sup>

Cole responded directly on "Snow on tha Bluff," saying "it's something about the Queen's tone that's bothering me," later going on to frame her consciousness and awareness as privileges to be checked and considered when engaging with - in his words - the "ignorant."<sup>36</sup> This willingness to step over the countless videos of extreme militarized police aggression and the deadly pandemic's disproportionate impact on the Black community to shout down a Black woman for holding rich and critically acclaimed Black men accountable is shockingly transparent in its toxicity, and it takes focus away from the critical work that needs to be done in marginalized communities.

While it might appear that Noname was shaming J. Cole, she was holding him accountable especially given his image as a conscious artist and the themes in previous songs. Cole released "Be Free" in response to the 2014 police shooting and murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri. In an interview with *Rolling Stones* about "Be Free," Cole describes how fame clouds the capacity to imagine a different type of revolutionary Black humanity when he says, "Career advances. Instagram is poppin...LIFE HITS. We become distracted. We become numb. I became numb."<sup>37</sup> This internal struggle is reflected in "Be Free" with lyrics such as "And I'm in denial, And it don't take no x-ray to see right through my smile," and "But I got other shit to think about, like my bank account" which contrasts to other lyrics in "Be Free" such as "Are we all alone, fighting on our own, Please give me a chance, I don't wanna dance, Some-things got me down, I will stand my ground, Don't just stand around, don't just stand around."<sup>38</sup> His thoughtful self-critique is subtle and smart. It hints that commodity fetishistic interests hinder the advancement of social justice causes, even if they are serving as distractions. Cole has explored this train of thought before and that is precisely how the spectacle works. Cole has been marketed as a deeper than average conscious artist despite having the same misogynistic and pro-capitalist

<sup>35</sup> Fnr Tigg, "Noname Calls Out 'Top-Selling' Rappers for Their Silence on George Floyd's Killing," *Complex*, 2020, accessed July 21, 2020,

<https://www.complex.com/music/2020/05/noname-favorite-rappers-silence-george-floyd-death>.

<sup>36</sup> J. Cole, "Snow on tha Bluff," *YouTube*, uploaded June 16, 2020 and accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZa3HyVLimQ>.

<sup>37</sup> Kory Grow, "J. Cole Mourns Michael Brown in Somber New Song 'Be Free,'" *Rolling Stones*, 2014, accessed July 26, 2020,

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/j-cole-mourns-michael-brown-in-somber-new-song-be-free-169276/>.

<sup>38</sup> J. Cole, "Be Free" performed on the David Letterman show, *YouTube*, uploaded December 13, 2014 and accessed July 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQZc8SH6EFk>.

blind spots in the messaging of his actual music. His image is not overly materialistic. His subject matter is usually reflective, which is more than enough for the spectacle to present an artist as genuinely subversive and/or revolutionary. This calls into question the conscious image of Cole since his early mixtapes, which is not an image that he readily identifies.<sup>39</sup> Cole's career embodies the struggle of so many artists when capitalist interests get in the way of revolutionary thought, which Freire and Yancy described as changing through an awareness of who the potential "other" is in the process of alienation and ongoing dialogical thought and action.

## Conclusion

Theodor Adorno once said that "art respects the masses, by confronting them as that which they could be, rather than confronting them in their current degraded state."<sup>40</sup> An end to second-order illiteracy through community-based, problem-posing education would combat and possibly eradicate the phenomenon of aesthetic nihilism (or at least challenge its monopoly on artistic engagement). This calls for a different model of education that subverts the ideology pushed by our current educational system – an ideology that requires passivity. Freire argues that education aims to "create critical reflective capacities...and to begin a project of liberation through praxis...which requires consistent, never-ending critical reflection and action."<sup>41</sup> Education should be inherently disruptive, with literacy serving as a means for consciousness-raising. Without this type of dialogical process, we are left in a state of intellectual passivity where artists (and others) are often alienated from their product, from the act of production, from others, and themselves. Lupe Fiasco and Noname are current examples of artists resisting the commodification of Hip Hop and are working towards a dialogical theory of action through their community education initiatives.<sup>42</sup> Scholars and educators such as Christopher Emdin also have advanced community education focused on Hip Hop pedagogy as a liberatory practice.<sup>43</sup>

A widespread willingness to critically engage with Hip Hop as an art form could prove catastrophic for the current assembly line, repetitious, and profit-motivated status quo of the mainstream machine. This is not to say that everything produced by a culture made up of audiences and artists who are more prone to critical engagement (with the aesthetics) would produce a high percentage of revolutionary art. Instead, it would – in large part – eliminate the built-in disincentives to produce or engage with such art. Artists with more challenging or off-kilter material would have a better chance of having their music heard and analyzed by more people, essentially providing an

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<sup>39</sup> Frannie Kelley, "J. Cole On Competition And Writing Honest Songs," *NPR*, 2013, accessed July 26, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/microphonecheck/2013/06/23/194594097/j-cole-on-competition-and-writing-honest-songs>. In an interview with *NPR* in 2013, J. Cole described himself as "trying to stay true to the art form and just to the craft" and his "heart is in hip-hop. My heart is in telling stories. And it's like therapy for me." While J. Cole is often referred to as a conscious artist, this is not an identity that he has accepted or a way that he describes himself. It may be more accurate to describe his work as enlightened.

<sup>40</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970; repr., London: Continuum, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Freire describes anti-dialogical action as based on conquest (transform a person into a product to be consumed), divide and rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion. In contrast, dialogical action is centered on cooperation, unity for liberation, organization, and cultural synthesis.

<sup>43</sup> A. A. Akom, "Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy as a Form of Liberatory Praxis," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 42, no. 1 (2009): 52-66; Christopher Emdin, *For White Folks who Teach in the Hood* (New York: Beacon Press, 2016); Emery Petchauer, "Starting with Style: Toward a Second Wave of Hip-Hop Education Research and Practice," *Urban Education* 50, no. 1 (2015): 78-105.

opportunity for a revolutionary boost in Hip Hop similar to the two lightning strikes in 1977.<sup>44</sup> Audiences being able to partake in “good listening” would accelerate the humanization process. Instead of having their art dictatorially disseminated by an oppressive abstraction (incapable of reaffirming their humanity), they would control the terms of their artistic engagement, therefore, affect its construction.

“The self-emancipation of our time is emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth.”<sup>45</sup> The spectacle is effective in societies and cultures ruled by capitalism as an ideology and economic system. Hip Hop divorcing itself from a capitalist ideology would help eliminate the power of the spectacle and would directly limit the amount of performative progressivism. Thus, images and representations present in today's culture could no longer single-handedly stand in, mediate and pose as valid representations of our reality.<sup>46</sup> This would not solve the crisis of leadership in Hip Hop culture, but it could open the door for more revolutionary leaders or strengthen the existing platforms of the revolutionaries already present in the culture who have been pushed into the fringes.

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<sup>44</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. Through achieving *conscientização*, the systematic domination of the aesthetics of Hip Hop by capitalism would be stopped and that power would handed back to the people. This is a revolutionary seizure of the means of production.

<sup>45</sup> DeBord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 221.

<sup>46</sup> The sub-oppressors could no longer stand in as our leaders.