

Rebels Without a Pause: Hip-hop and Resistance in the City

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Abstract

At the outset of the 1970s, with the city of New York deep in financial crisis, the Bronx was the scene of violent conflict between rival gangs. In 1971, however, the South Bronx gangs came together to sign a truce. Afrika Bambaataa, a young warlord from the Black Spade gang, emerged as a peacemaker. In 1975 he created his own organization, the Universal Zulu Nation, which brought together the four components of hip-hop culture (DJing, MCing, Bboying and graffiti). Bambaataa organized the first block parties, informal gatherings where DJs illegally ran sound systems off the municipal power supply. The block parties catalysed the South Bronx youth, for a time contributing to a more peaceful gang culture. Using the resistance paradigm, and Cornel West's substantial conception of cultural democracy, this essay questions whether hip-hop engages and potentially challenges American democracy in creating an autonomous space for putting citizenship into practice. The essay concludes by arguing firstly that hip-hop can be seen as a hidden transcript emerging from places of exclusion, and secondly that its diffusion is inscribed in struggles for space in the city.

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised¹

On 27 May 2011, Gil Scott-Heron — the godfather of hip-hop, as most MCs called him — died. Amongst other things, he is known for his prophetic 1971 song *The Revolution will not be Televised*. Although it has (ironically) become commercialized over the years, the song is a prime example of how the hip-hop movement constructed itself as a political discourse. This essay's focus is on these political dimensions. Focusing on the earlier hip-hop movement — from its emergence in the South Bronx to the death of Tupac Shakur² — and using Asef Bayat's analytical framework on 'street politics', I want to argue here that hip-hop can be seen as an unconventional form of activism and must therefore also be analysed as a political and social movement. Following the resistance paradigm, and Cornel West's substantial conception of the cultural democracy, I argue that hip-hop engages with and potentially challenges American democracy by creating an autonomous space in which to practice citizenship. I seek to underline the importance of studying hip-hop in order to better understand social relations and ways of appropriating space in the city. This discussion is built on several important texts on hip-hop, which I put in perspective with works developed in other fields of research literature (e.g. West,

This is the article version of the paper I gave at the RC21 conference in July 2011. My thanks goes out to the organizers, and the publishing team who helped me re-work this article.

1 *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, by Gil Scott-Heron; © Bob Thiele Music Ltd, 1971.

2 Indeed the period following Tupac's death in 1996 is often considered a turning point, after which commercialized rap became predominant.

2001; 2005; Bayat, 2010). It does not pretend to be an exhaustive review of literature, but instead a modest contribution about the hip-hop experience from an urban point of view.

Hip-hop, emergence, context

To understand how hip-hop emerged as resistance practice we need to return to the context of its first expression. In the 1970s, after the decline of the civil rights movement, the poorest African American populations lived through a period of disillusionment. The black ghettos became increasingly segregated, largely due to the departure of the black middle classes (Wilson, 1987). In the South Bronx, these years were marked by an unprecedented growth of street gangs. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, Scott-Heron criticized mass media and the unconcerned white middle-class America that ignored the disintegration of inner-city black communities. As journalist Jeff Chang (2008: 60) noted, ‘the history of gangs in the Bronx is the dub version of the history of the years 1968 to 1973, the other side of the revolution’. While the gang battles intensified, big parties known as block parties organized by street gangs became regular occurrences in some South Bronx neighbourhoods. They were at the heart of a cultural movement — hip-hop culture — that has continued to grow ever since. The first hip-hop movement was thus linked to the development of gangs and urban informality.

The hip-hop movement is rooted in a struggle for public space and a claim for street presence (Rose, 1994). This is particularly true for earlier hip-hop, which emerged from New York gang culture and its struggle for territorial control. Following Morant (2010: 72) on funk, we can defend hip-hop by suggesting that it served as a counter-protest movement, a creative form of communication that used everyday life experience as a base upon which to build a new social critique in the wake of the civil rights movement. However, because of a drop in protest activity from the mid-1970s into the 1980s, movement-focused social research has neglected the political scope of 1980s hip-hop in favor of events of the previous decade (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004).

Hip-hop is well known to researchers, especially those in the field of ethnomusicology, and many studies have focused on hip-hop lyrics or particular personalities (Guy, 2004; Quinn, 2004; Kubrin, 2005). Some have focused on rap as performance (Dimitriadis, 1996; Smitherman, 1997; Guy, 2004) or on the question of race in hip-hop (Kelley, 1996; Ramsey, 2003; Harrison, 2009). Others have analysed the particular production of gangsta rap, and the often violent and stereotyping images conveyed by MCs (Guy, 2004; Quinn, 2004; Kubrin, 2005), or are interested in the production of a special space in hip-hop lyrics (Forman, 2000; Hess, 2009). The political dimension has already been analysed by scholars interrogating lyrics and the MC’s life (Henderson, 1996; Alridge, 2003; Boyd, 2003; Perry, 2004; Morant, 2010; Stanford, 2011) or the relations between rap and the state (Nielson, 2010). Here I would like to focus on the construction of resistance identities and their ambiguities.

*Rebel Without a Pause*³

In the last two decades, anthropologists have developed interesting ways of conceptualizing the fashionable topic of the resistance paradigm. Attention has shifted from issues of social control and social structure to issues of agency and resistance. Because of this rapid proliferation in different disciplines, scholars use the term ‘resistance’ to describe a wide variety of actions and behaviours at all levels of social life,

3 *Rebel Without A Pause*, by Public Enemy; © Def Jam Recordings Inc., 1988.

but the term itself still lacks an adequate definition (Brown, 1996; Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). One can find the resistance paradigm's roots in Foucault's (1980) analysis of circulating power, where Foucault drew attention to less organized, un-institutional and more pervasive forms of resistance. His work finds an echo in Scott's (1990) work on 'everyday forms of resistance'. Recent works such as Bayat (2010) have discussed this notion of everyday practice of resistance in the urban context. Bayat emphasizes Scott's everyday resistance idea, and uses Foucault's decentred notion of power to analyse micropolitics and the resistance perspective. In Bayat's perspective, the analysis of conventional social movements (protests, political party activism, etc.) does not take into account the political participation of the marginalized strata.

As researchers, we should decentralize our levels of analysis and look more closely at micropolitical activity. These common day-to-day practices are defined as practices of resistance which are not guided by an ideology or even a leader or an organization. These actions are often quiet, almost silent, and Bayat (*ibid.*: 13) concludes that 'theirs is not a politics of protest, but a practice of redress through direct and disparate actions'. I will use the notion of practices of resistance in this perspective, and I will add that these practices do not necessarily reflect against an opponent, an idea or a system but nevertheless participate in the construction of subjectivities of resistance by sharing a common language.

The process of sampling is one of rap's most significant formal innovations (Shusterman, 1991), whereby rappers — or more commonly DJs or producers — take one sound from a record and re-incorporate it with another one, making a new record. There is no longer a single artist or interpretation of a song, but a multiplicity of artists from various periods and styles. This typical hip-hop process echoes Cornell West's argument about jazz as a mode of being in the world. According to West (2001; 2005), black Americans had no alternative but to respond to racial terror through a 'substantial conception of democracy', which implied not only the protection of rights and liberties, but also (and especially) the promotion of self-respect and dignity in the private and the public spheres. Opposed to 'masquerade' democracy, African Americans built up a 'substantial form of cultural democracy' (West, 2009) that is not reductive to a form of government but rather a cultural way of being. Hip-hop lyrics often refer to the 'cipher', a conceptual space in which consciousness is the priority. It is the same cipher that is the centre of the hip-hop dance battle. The cipher is the place to be free and to perform a particular belonging and citizenship (Perry, 2004). It is in the liberating potential of the daily practices of empowerment, as well as in the 'infinity lessons' of the Universal Zulu Nation offered by Afrika Bambaataa (referred to in more detail later in this essay), that one finds another way of being a citizen, a kind of democracy different from the current one. Practices of resistance are indeed the heart of the artistic form of hip-hop.

Hip-hop provides both a politics of recognition and rage and an aspirational focus (Pieterse, 2010) for urban youth up against marginalization, isolation and exclusion. As Pieterse (*ibid.*: 432) argues, hip-hop music challenges urban exclusion, violence and exploitation by 'offering an alternative sense of place, a means of interpreting the world' and, I would add, also a different way of being. Thus, in terms of an art of being in a particular space such as 'turf' or imagined cipher, and in terms of providing an 'in your face' black rage identity that contrasts with the mainstream, hip-hop practices are really about trying to find alternative affiliation within, and in, the city. Resistance is then less a resistance 'against' or 'to', but the building of a way of being, anchored in the city's sound and movement. This way of being is the core for other authors of a new conception of citizenship. Boudreau and Grundy (2008) defend this by claiming that the notion of citizenship has evolved considerably, incorporating over the years substantive dimensions. Citizenship is built upon conflict and negotiation. Likewise, for Isin and Nielsen (2008, cited in Boudreau and Grundy, 2008) the act of citizenship is a relational act that can be acted out as a claim. The notion of citizenship is thus dynamic, allowing one to think of the 'act of being present' (Bayat, 2010) as an act of citizenship. This approach is consistent with Holston's (1995; 2001) thesis that cities are the locus for the

emergence of a new citizenship. This 'urban citizenship' is not opposed to classic national citizenship; it is rather juxtaposed. These urban citizens, therefore, exercise a substantive citizenship.

However, there is never a single and simple resistance (Ortner, 1995). The post-colonial concept of ambivalence (Bhabha, 1985; Hanks, 1986) has to be (re)explored in this case to provide us with an air of romanticism. As Foucault (1980) argues, power circulates; power and counter-power are not in binary opposition, but exist in a decoupled, complex, ambivalent and perpetual 'dance of control' (Bayat, 2010: 46). So, in order to listen to this 'voice from the 'hood', or rather 'voices from the 'hood', we need to acknowledge with Ortner (1995: 176–77) that people have 'their own politics'.

In this theoretical perspective, I would like to point out several dimensions of hip-hop culture that can be characterized as practices of resistance. Indeed, I propose to look closely at Scott's (1990) notion of the 'hidden transcript' in relation to rap lyrics, before going on to underline the practice of hip-hop as one where space is at stake.

Hip-hop and the hidden transcript

One of the propositions of Tricia Rose's (1994) work is to analyse hip-hop practice and lyrics as a hidden transcript as conceptualized by James Scott. In his work *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Scott (1990) elaborates what he calls 'hidden transcripts' and 'public transcripts' of dominated populations. He theorizes the nature of communication across lines of power and explains how power relations affect what people say to different social audiences. In what interests us here, the hidden transcript consists of the backstage discourse of the dominated, hidden from the dominants' sight and control. The hidden transcript of the subordinated is an emotionally fuelled response to the practice of domination. In its proper social site, the hidden transcript provides the means to express these emotions and make them collective (Gal, 1995). In our case, this hidden transcript is the one the population of the South Bronx elaborated in the 1980s. Hip-hop emerged through two different practices.

The first one related to block parties. While clashes between neighbourhood gangs intensified in the 1970s and 1980s, the ceasefire of 1971 reconciled black and Latino gangs in the South Bronx. This peace treaty had a profound impact on the South Bronx, particularly because of the personal involvement of Afrika Bambaataa, a young warlord of the Black Spades (one of the larger gangs in the South Bronx, presided over by Bam Bam). In 1975, Bambaataa launched the Universal Zulu Nation which put on evening parties — the block parties — mobilizing gang discipline and support in organizing them. This movement was the core of hip-hop culture as it brought together its four key components: DJing, MCing, Bboying and graffiti. Block parties henceforth became the meeting place for different actors of the hip-hop scene. Thus, hip-hop emerged from gangs' organizational practice and actions, and indirectly became a tool for the pacification of the South Bronx area. Block parties served as a catalyst movement for the youth of the neighbourhood. However, even if hip-hop's earlier period is embedded in gang history, hip-hop subsequently represented a counter-proposition to its original violence.

The second practice, the mixtape, emerged as a musical force in the late 1960s with the advent of technology allowing DJs to spin records into original mixes and record them onto cassettes. In fact, Ball (2008: 623) notes, the mixtape was 'hip-hop's original mass medium in the days prior to its acceptance as pop culture'. During the 1980s and 1990s, before the wholesale commercialization of hip-hop, mixtapes were sold on street corners by the DJs themselves, or in the back of record stores. The notion of self-production was crucial to the early hip-hop cultural movement, and its origins were also 'organic and indigenous to the community in which such culture found its subsistence, with the idea of self-sufficiency and self-production' (Maher, 2005: 150).

Mixtape also recalls the informal origins of hip-hop. Thus, rap in its first years was less visible than today, allowing the MC Nas to call it a 'ghetto secret'. It was only in 1979, with the release of the hit single 'Rapper's Delight',⁴ that rap slowly began to grow, moving from a confined ghetto secret into 'the public sphere of world wide cultural discourse' (Dimitriadis, 1996: 179).

Moreover, rap lyrics consolidate the theory of hip-hop as hidden transcript. Intentional misspelling is typical in rap lyrics; Nielson (2010) suggests that rappers intentionally disregard the spelling used by the dominant culture and thus challenge the 'socio-cultural and linguistic hegemony' (Olivo, 2001: 70). 'Nowhere is this more apparent than in Black music, whose lyrics have often included lexical items whose meanings are not meant to be discernible to a mainstream audience' (Nielson, 2010: 1261). The semantic inversion, what MCs call 'flippin the script', is intended to preserve a hidden form of communication among the black community, that would be 'linguistically unintelligible to the oppressor' (Smitherman, 1997: 17) and can be understood as an anti-language in the face of the public transcript. Or as Chuck D of Public Enemy (quoted in Fernando, 1994: 303) put it, 'Rap is Black folks' CNN'.

However, hip-hop is rooted in an ambiguity between its inherent secrecy as a hidden transcript, and the task of becoming public in order to reach a larger audience and express emotions to others. Graffiti, and to a lesser extent dance, are a good example. Graff crew, though informally organized and committing illegal acts — such as tagging public facades — nevertheless play an ambiguous role due to the overt nature of the medium's display. Scott's framework has to be nuanced here, and the opposition between hidden and public transcript cannot be rigid. In fact, ambiguity — the same ambiguity that Bhabha (1985) writes about, between the desire of being recognized and the raw hip-hop underground discourses and practices of self-production — is part of hip-hop's earlier expression and can be found in the continuous opposition between underground and mainstream. Such ambiguity allows us to see hip-hop as a kind of hidden transcript that finds a place in Bayat's (2010) 'street politics' argument. But it is not only hidden (Scott) or quiet (Bayat), it is at times as loud and spectacular as the sound systems at block parties (or as graff or dance can be).

Hip-hop and the struggle for space

Hip-hop culture, and rap in particular, began as a situated cultural practice and emerged in a typical spatial context, namely block parties. Here turf is at stake, and hip-hop constitutes a protective space where the hidden discourse can be expressed outside of the dominant view. Organized by DJs and local gangs, block parties provided places of enjoyment as well as marking a particular territory. In fact, the hip-hop movement is rooted in the struggle for public space and the claim of streets, as Bayat's (2010) concept of street politics explains (see also Nielson, 2010). The notion of 'street politics' that Bayat uses refers to the conflicts played out in the streets between individuals or groups and the authorities. Indeed, conflict is generated when citizens actively take over the streets when only passive use of them is allowed. Therefore, according to Bayat, street vendors whose activities unintentionally extend onto the sidewalk, park squatters, youths lingering at corners and women selling homemade food on the streets all question the state and its prerogatives by actively appropriating the public space in their daily activities. On the other hand, the struggle for the control of public spaces makes way for the development of collective identities and solidarities. What is more, writes Bayat (2010: 13), these street politics 'signify a crucial symbolic utterance, one that goes beyond the physicality of streets to convey collective sentiments of a nation or a community'.

4 *Rapper's Delight*, by The Sugarhill Gang; © Sugar Hill Records, 1979.

Nielson (2010: 1256) notes that this space claiming was 'obvious in the fierce territoriality of the New York gang culture from which hip hop sprang, and it soon came to characterize hip hop performances as well', which were 'traditionally staged within geographical boundaries that demarcate turf and territory' (Forman, 2000: 68). Earlier breakdancers, for example, performed in crews that controlled certain neighbourhoods. Moreover, the cipher in which the dancer competes represents a territory that has to be conquered. Often, two crews battle around a circle, the cipher, with each individual performing for the cause of the crew, until one of them wins the spot. Graffiti artists directly practice this street politics by tagging sides of trains or walls to show belonging as an art of presence (Bayat, 2010).

In the emergent period of rap, DJs had spatial distribution of sound systems and crews in New York. As Grandmaster Flash (quoted in Forman, 2000: 66), one of the first DJs on the South Bronx scene, explains: 'We had territories. It was like, Kool Herc had the west side. Bam had Bronx River. DJ Breakout had way uptown Gun Hill'. Those territories were recognized by all the participants of block parties and protected by gangs. Some scholars identify a transition from gang-oriented affiliations to music and breakdance affiliations that maintained the important structuring systems of territorialities (Hager, 1984; Toop, 1984). This alternative geography was based and established among DJs, depending on their gang belonging and their authority over the territory. But moreover, these places must be understood as 'lived places and localized sites of significance' (Forman, 2000: 67) and are not immovable. Together, notes Forman (*ibid.*), 'these overlapping practices and methods of constructed place-based identities, and of inscribing and enunciating individual and collective presence, created the bonds upon which affiliations were forged within specific social geographies'. In fact, rap gave the city an audible presence (*ibid.*). Those practices found roots in the traditional geographical boundaries created by gangs to protect turf and territories. For Tricia Rose (quoted in Forman, 2000: 71), rappers' emphasis on 'posse', crew and neighbourhood has 'brought the ghetto back into the public consciousness'. The term 'posse' is related to Jamaican gang culture (Gunst, 1995) that 'adapted a gangster imagery of movies into its own cultural systems' (Forman, 2000: 71). As noted by Forman, the Jamaican posse expansion in New York coincided with the emergence of rap in the South Bronx. Many rappers claimed belonging to their posse as well as a specific (neighbour)hood identity. But the territory was also the place where MCs first tested their ability and gained local reputation.

By tracing the history of the emergence of the hip-hop movement — from its birth in the Bronx to its stratification — Hagedorn (1988; 2008) shows that hip-hop culture is an expression of the dispossessed, a manner of making sense and creating an identity of opposition. Hagedorn's concept of 'defensive space' describes places where gangs, and then hip-hop, evolved, protected from oppression. We can refer also to what Scott (1990) identifies as a social site, a protected physical space where hidden transcripts may emerge. It is necessarily an area that cannot be reached by the controlling hands of those who dominate. Hence, the production of hidden transcripts depends on the creation of physical places left relatively unguarded.

In its earlier days, rap was an ephemeral live performance. Tricia Rose (1994) argues that hip-hop culture shows the importance of the post-industrial city as the central urban influence, and that the particularities of urban space are subjected to the deconstructive and reconstructive practice of rap artists. In fact, the New York sound systems' alternative geography stressed the strategies used by MCs, graffers and breakdancers, giving rise to a radical transformation of the city. It was the 'voice of the ghetto' that had for once an audible presence and a physical trace through tagging of the metro system, from the Bronx in the north all the way downtown. It displaced the centre of experiences, hype and creativity northwards. It re-centred the habitual geography of New York, establishing downtown as the locus of 'what happens', nullifying the frontier, or invading the old frontier. It was an alternative geography, radical in its way, of affirming a place and a presence in the city. It was thus a way to critique the informal, but very performative,

frontier between the rich downtown and the rundown South Bronx. Finally, those spaces of protection, where hip-hop emerged and evolved — to reach other spaces — were also symbolic and imaginary spaces, which is suggested by the use of the term hip-hop nation.

After Bambaataa launched his Universal Zulu Nation, factions rapidly multiplied across the South Bronx, gradually supplanting the Black Spades, but spreading out to cover larger territories. However, though the legacy of the gangs remained (symbolically at least), Bambaataa cemented his organization's emergence, doing so in a style epitomized by his new catchphrase: 'peace, unity, love and having fun'. Instead of a set of beliefs, the Universal Zulu Nation promulgated the 'seven infinity lessons', which can be considered as the basic founding principles for its members. Encompassing a vagabond eclecticism, they blend a little familiarity with a lot of esotericism (Chang, 2008). Most of all, the Universal Zulu Nation experience was an attempt to empower the excluded. As a new mystique, it was adopted by an army of Bboys, graffitists and MCs, who surpassed Bambaataa in creating a new culture, and above all a new way of being part of society.

'The revolution is here'⁵

Three decades after Gil Scott-Heron's poem about the state of the inner cities, Chicago-based rapper Common sang 'the revolution will not be televised/the revolution is here' in the introduction of 'The 6th Sense'. In this way Common recalls Scott-Heron's song-poem and shows us what hip-hop has brought since the 1970s in the matter of political struggle. Registering the revolution in the present, Common accords hip-hop a particular political resistance force.

However, as previously observed, resistance is never simple and singular. Nor is it exempt from ambiguity. The more hip-hop has been recognized, the more its practitioners have had to deal with the question of whether to become mainstream or stay underground. Hip-hop is simultaneously an identity built in a social and spatially hidden position, and a practice loudly enunciating its existence in the face of the city. The diversity and the heterogeneity, as well as the central questions of age, gender and class, all add to the density and multi-layered discourses of hip-hop (Pieterse, 2010: 437), a complexity that I have here briefly tried to extract at the risk of proposing perhaps too simple a view.

Since the early 1990s, rap music has undergone major transformations with the emergence of gangsta rap. However, in the same period hip-hop culture has been exported far beyond its original social context, establishing itself as a form of expression among urban marginalized youth globally. The unconventional forms of activism that represent hip-hop urge us to think about the resistance concept beyond a simple binary, because these practices are about the construction of new subjectivities that cannot just be understood as a lack — be it lack of state intervention, lack of employment, lack of norms or lack of social ties.

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5 Lyrics from *The 6th Sense*, by Common; © MCA Records, 1999.

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