

GETTING A BAD RAP: HOW WE DISCUSS HIP HOP IN AMERICA AND ISRAEL

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On a recent trip to Israel, I sat on a bus winding slowly down roads in the Carmel Hills, leaving a youth camp for inner-city Ethiopian Israelis. This camp, a kind of fresh-air program, seeks to nurture the teenagers of Israel's poorest immigrant class in a safe environment far removed from the ghettos in which they were raised. The tour guide on the bus described these ghettos, saying, "There's violence, drug abuse and poverty, and many of these teenagers are listening to gangsta rap from America, so you can see where it comes from." In that cursory, casual even, statement on a bus in Carmel, thousands of miles from Harlem and the Bronx, I was stunned. Not only had hip hop and gangsta rap (a generally violent and highly commercialized sub-genre of hip hop) been wrongly conflated, but the argument that the art form is a cause of black suffering—the same argument frequently made in America—had reared its head just as boldly in Israel. I began to wonder about the conversations being had about hip hop that support such a belief across the globe, and what effect they have on disenfranchised blacks in America and Israel.

Though I did not expect "gangsta rap" would come up in discussion on a bus in such a remote place in Israel, the general vilification of all hip hop is so ubiquitous that it should not have come as a surprise. As the tour guide went on to laud "coexistence efforts," I turned to look out the window, gradually tuning her out. Listening to the real spokespersons, I decided, would be better than listening to the guide and shaking my head in frustration, so I put my earbuds in to reach the source with Nas and Tupac, American hip hop giants from the 1990s and 2000s. Tupac asserts, "Instead of a war on poverty, / They got a war on drugs so the police can bother me" ("Changes"), while Nas calls out Western hegemony: "Assassinations / Diplomatic relations / Killed indigenous people / Built a new nation" ("America"), lyrics that call out systems of oppression and colonial projects of nation-building that serve a ruling class through the suffering of an oppressed population. The work of both rappers found its way into my ruminations on hip hop and race and the conversations I heard regarding both in America and Israel.

Nas, a towering hip hop figure in New York since his debut album *Illmatic* in 1994, was interviewed on CNN in 2009 about his lyrics and gang violence in Chicago. In the interview, Don Lemon, the correspondent, repeatedly tries to get Nas to claim responsibility for ghetto violence via an album he recorded ten years earlier, specifically a track called "Shoot 'em Up." Lemon asks him whether he thinks his music influences the violence, and Nas replies, "It's the obvious thing for the media to kind of point out one of [my] most violent lyrical records. . . . I made records about children and

struggle, and those are never the songs that are talked about. . . . There's only attention put on the songs where there's violence in it, but the reality is, I'm only speaking about reality" ("NAS on CNN"). Nas points out, crucially, that there are two conversations being had around the issue: one about the alleged influence hip hop has on black crime and another about the conversation itself, how hip hop is discussed in mainstream media. Speaking just as much to the sort of error my tour guide made in conflating gangsta rap with the larger genre of hip hop as he is responding to Lemon, Nas isolates the correspondent's conflation of one violent song with his entire discography. This conflation precludes any meaningful, honest discussion. When pushed further to answer for black violence and the agency of hip hop stars, Nas again directs the conversation to lived experience and the historical grounds frequently overlooked in external perceptions of ghetto life: "Violence was here. . . . Violence and war has been the things that's even built this country. A rap song in the 21st century influencing violence is a joke" ("NAS on CNN"). Far from circumventing a conversation on violence and incitement, Nas focuses on larger themes that acknowledge the history and daily realities of disenfranchised blacks, suggesting this needs to occur first before a productive conversation can be had about those realities or the music that is most frequently associated with them.

By centering not on the rhetoric of hip hop, but on the rhetoric of the conversation around hip hop, Nas aims to destabilize the normalization of black crime and the musical influence thereof. He focuses on origins of issues and root causes, rather than contemporary perceptions of and commercial backlash against popular songs. Indeed, Tricia Rose, professor of Africana Studies at Brown University and widely published commentator on hip hop, names Nas in her 2008 book *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* as a rapper who engages "eloquently and at length in . . . the polarized debates over violence and sexism in hip hop" broadcasted in the mainstream media (269). Supporting his claim on CNN that he has been responsible for songs that talk about struggle and not about violence alone, Rose draws attention to lyrics Nas wrote in "Gangsta Tears" that, as she puts it, "tap into the pain, loss, and seemingly permanent cycle of retribution" that influence the rap he and many other artists put out (57). Rose is keen on incorporating the historical and sociological underpinnings of hip hop and black disenfranchisement. Hip hop, she argues, is not an example of "black cultural dysfunction," the myth that blacks are inherently drawn to destitution and, in her words, "the very same argument that deemed blacks suitable for enslavement," but rather, hip hop is an expression and writing back of that history of racism (64). Similarly, a grasp on the history of Ethiopian migration to Israel and the subsequent ghettoization of that population may help people understand "where they get it" with greater nuance and generosity.

Between 1984 and 1991, the vast majority of Jews living in Ethiopia were brought to Israel in what should have been a glorious arrival in the Jewish State (Shabtay 94). Yet, owing to the predominantly white hierarchy of power in Israel, the Ethiopians'

arrival was met with skepticism of their religiosity and racial discrimination on a structural level that has since marginalized them in Israeli society and spawned a first generation of ghettoized Ethiopian-Israelis who are struggling to understand where they fit in (Shabtay 94-95). Some are realizing that they don't fit in, as one man describes in "RaGap': Music and Identity Among Young Ethiopians in Israel," a scholarly article by Dr. Malka Shabtay: "You feel betrayed and are called 'n*****'. You made it to Israel and it doesn't work" (100). Shabtay, an applied anthropologist whose work largely focuses on the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, points out that many alienated black Jews from poor, crime-ridden communities listen to American hip hop as a coping mechanism: "What they [American rappers] have been through is similar to what we have been through here. They lived in a poor social environment; they face racism everywhere they go. Now they have progressed . . . I believe that we shall progress as well, in spite of our skin colour," said one Ethiopian Israeli interviewed (Shabtay 100). Despite what may be an oversimplified assumption of progress and directionality for black Americans in this quote, a clear commonality of struggle comes through this logic—commonality not in violent resistance, but in blackness and voicelessness. Incidentally, both blackness and voicelessness are cornerstones of hip hop.

The distance between Ethiopian Israelis and the origins of hip hop in the United States, though exceedingly vast, does not rule out the closely shared experience of alienation and marginalization in black communities that defines much of hip hop. This art form, in both communities, is the device by which oppression is given a name by the otherwise voiceless, hidden people suffering from it. Acclaimed hip hop commentator Jay Smooth posits in a video monologue that hip hop made it so "America's most invisible people could be seen and heard," a development that one would think to be a positive step toward justice and equality. Yet, ironically, it is this attention to black voices and their lived realities, Smooth asserts, that makes hip hop a target for critics such as Don Lemon and the tour guide. Smooth claims that the effect of hip hop's popularity and listenership was a shift in media coverage where, as he puts it, "they stopped ignoring us and started being scared of us." Safiya Umoja Noble, an assistant professor in the Department of Media and Cinema Studies and the Institute for Communications Research at the University of Illinois, argues in "Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle" that this reaction of fear of hip hop is rooted in its commodification, packaged as "black masculinity as criminality" (15). Thus, beyond the specific words and imagery associated with hip hop and especially gangsta rap, Noble points to a larger system of oppression in which "[s]elling criminality is big business" (15). Perhaps the tour guide had been caught up in this false notion that hip hop is criminal by virtue of its commodification rather than from having listened to the music itself. In this way, it would seem that the wrong conversation around hip hop speaks to more than just music; all the facets of

production of hip hop, from a rapper's inspiration to the sale of an album, risk scapegoating black crime in mainstream media spheres.

If the discussion around hip hop and its listenership is, as Noble indicates, rooted not just in the lyrics, then perhaps the focal point is black identity itself. Beyond catchy rhythms and rhymes, the shared stake Ethiopian Israelis have in issues raised by legends such as Nas and his 1990s-era hip hop contemporaries, as well as artists that have both preceded and followed him, is their identity as oppressed blacks. Nevertheless, scrutiny of hip hop rarely examines black oppression and empowerment, but rather the popular verses that stand out as edgy or inappropriate to the mainstream public audience. In her book *The Hip Hop Wars*, Rose describes the commercialization of hip hop and its subsequent mainstream attention through a paradigm she calls the "trinity of commercial hip hop": gangstas, pimps, and hoes (4). This combination, she acknowledges, earns good money and good ratings but is wrongly made the face of hip hop and the bane of ghetto ills. Rose argues that this commercial trinity "has become the fuel that propels public criticism of young black people" through a framework, a trinity in itself, of *one*: unfairly generalizing all hip hop; *two*: discussing it in a tone of disdain and disregard; and *three*: leaving out the real issue of structural racism and its effects on black communities (7). Each of these three concerns is evident in the Nas interview with Don Lemon in which, *one*: a single, decade-old violent song is misleadingly made the face of Nas's artistry; *two*: accusation is the only rhetorical strategy Lemon wields; and *three*: the deep-seated issues of racism and violence in America are not the points of discussion until Nas makes them the points of discussion. Like Lemon's rhetoric, the tour guide's stereotyping of hip hop, condescension toward it, and omission of Israeli racism violate each of the three points by which Rose's standard, the rap trinity, is maintained, demonstrating that those pitfalls are not limited to the American critique of hip hop.

What Rose's analysis of hip hop's public reception shows is simply that critics generally miss the mark in their conversations on hip hop. Beneath the commercial rap trinity and misdirected contempt for hip hop, especially that rhetoric that is supposedly aimed at helping black people, lies a world of political and unified sound that crosses borders and perseveres despite vilification. One song I listened to on the bus in Carmel to melt my frustration with the tour guide's remark was Tupac's "Keep Ya Head Up" in which he asks the "real men" to "get up" and for the ladies to "keep [their] head[s] up" in the face of sexism and objectification. Citing politicians' attempts at policing the womb, for one, Tupac demonstrates with ease the conversation being had in hip hop verses that do not seem to make Don Lemon's CNN segment or my tour guide's iTunes library. To the contrary, Tupac's art form is extremely political and in close contact with the lives of blacks in ghettos, a style that endears him to Ethiopian-Israeli rapper David, who said, "*Dans ses chansons Tupac parle de racism . . . Il capte des segments de la vie quotidienne, de la vie du quartier tu sais . . . c'est comme s'il vit ici en Israël*," which translates as, "In his songs Tupac speaks about racism . . . captures

segments of daily life, the life of the neighborhood . . . it is as if he lives here in Israel” (Djerrahian 39). Gabriella Djerrahian, an anthropologist at McGill University, quotes David, a first-generation Ethiopian Israeli, in an article published in 2010 entitled “*Éléments d’une négritude mondialisée: le hip-hop et la conscience raciale chez de jeunes Israéliens d’origine éthiopienne*” (“Elements of Globalized Blackness: The Hip Hop and Racial Conscience Among Young Israelis of Ethiopian Origin”). Another young Ethiopian Israeli interviewed by Shabtay states, “We are influenced more and more by the music, and as we become more involved in learning who makes the music and how they live, we identify with them,” explicating a process of finding a voice and a vehicle of expression in much the same way Smooth described as having taken place in the early American hip hop scene (Shabtay 100). To David, the first native Hebrew speaker in his family, music and shared identity as oppressed blacks speaks louder than nationality and/or ethnicity; to him, the music spans borders and gives a kind of agency to a population only just beginning to recover from the collective trauma of migration and assimilation in a foreign country.

David’s quote relates to the work of Columbia University ethnomusicologist Nili Belkind in her doctoral thesis, “Music in Conflict: Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Aesthetic Production.” Here, Belkind explores modes of music production that have been used to establish domestic solidarity and peace among members of Israel’s diverse ethnic patchwork. Describing “bulldozer night,” an outdoor concert that protested an Israeli-planned home demolition, Belkind recounts performances of local hip hop artists who rapped in several languages, representing a wealth of diversity in a show put on to save a Palestinian person’s home from being destroyed. Belkind’s reflection speaks to the binding ties of music beyond its capacity to entertain: “struggles over meaning and territory, the nation and its ‘others,’ are not necessarily signified through specific musical genres, styles and performance practices . . . but rather, through the contexts in which they are deployed to collective ends” (35). In this spirit of understanding cross-cultural differences and similarities through music, hip hop serves as a global forum of idea sharing, as already evidenced by the inspiration David derives from Tupac. Belkind’s assertion, furthermore, adds another dimension to the oneness Ethiopian Israelis feel with American blacks through the lyrics of American rappers: although the places are different and each song is different, hip hop is a vehicle for identifying a collective struggle.

For all the frustration I felt on that bus in Carmel, it is only fair to acknowledge what was correct in the tour guide’s remark. There is indeed violence, drug abuse, and poverty in Ethiopian communities in Israel, and it also would seem that some Ethiopian Israelis are indeed listening to American hip hop, in one form or another. These facts established, what may follow is either a productive conversation that acknowledges racist power structures and historical disenfranchisement of blacks or a misdirected conversation that focuses on the gangstas, pimps, and hoes that others believe are fostering criminality in black communities. What cannot be touched by

either conversation, however, is the reality that hip hop as an art form, despite a world of detractors, does something remarkable in giving voice and visibility to black struggle far beyond the ghettos of the United States where rappers such as Nas and Tupac found inspiration in oppression. Their suffering, racist suffering, is not limited to America, and where it exists in Israel, it is a source of both artistic creativity and global solidarity transmitted through music.

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