

# The Power of the Underground: Hip-Hop and African American Culture

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Over the last 40 years hip-hop culture has developed from a relatively unknown and largely ignored inner city culture into a global phenomenon. The foundational elements of hip-hop culture (DJ-ing, MC-ing, Breakdance, and Graffiti/Graf) are manifest in youth culture across the globe, including Japan, France, Germany, Ghana, Cuba, India and the UK. Considering its humble beginnings in the South and West Bronx neighborhoods of New York City, the global development of hip-hop is an amazing cultural phenomenon.<sup>1)</sup> Moreover, Hip Hop's current global popularity might obscure the fact of its humble underground beginnings. We do not generally think of hip-hop culture as being an underground phenomenon in the 21st century, mostly because of the presence of rap music and other elements of the culture in marketing, in advertising and in popular culture all over the world. But hip-hop culture emerges from a variety of undergrounds, undergrounds that can be defined in many ways. Consider the New York subway system, the illegal nature of graffiti art, or the musical "digging" required to produce hip-hop tracks and you can begin to grasp the literal and metaphorical ways that hip-hop culture is informed via the aesthetics of the underground.

The underground nature of hip-hop culture begins with its origins in the mid-1970s in New York City. In 1967, Clive Campbell, also known as the legendary DJ Kool Herc, immigrated to New York City and settled in the West Bronx. Kool Herc was born in Kingston Jamaica, the birthplace of another great musical forefather, the legend, Bob Marley. Herc borrowed elements of yard culture in Jamaica, especially the penchant for throwing spontaneous parties outside (i.e. public spaces) and the sounds and rhythms from James Brown's soulful styles in order to develop the early aesthetics of hip-hop music. For the most part, scholars and historians agree that DJ Kool Herc is one of the most notable founding figures of hip-hop culture.<sup>2)</sup> He DJ-ed some of the earliest hip-hop jams, occasionally in basements, but usually outside in the streets or in the park. Kool Herc was famous for his 6 feet tall speakers, nicknamed the Herculoids. He himself stands about 6 foot 5 inches tall—literally and figuratively a giant in hip-hop, but these early hip-hop jams or parties would be considered "underground" by almost any definition. They were off the "grid." They were not mainstream.

By the mid-70s DJ Kool Herc's parties were becoming well known in New York City. In fact hip-hop jams were an affordable alternative to pricey disco clubs. As early hip-hop DJs began to develop the various techniques of early DJ-ing, the potential of the culture emerged in excitement amongst young B-boys and B-girls. The early hip-hop DJs invented the concept of scratching,

skillfully manipulating vinyl records to sonically rupture recorded music and play fragments of it back at will. Even before scratching was developed, DJs isolated and looped break beats from popular records. Break beats, that portion of a song where the music and vocals take a back seat to the beat, became the signature sound of hip-hop, hence the evolution of Break Boys or B-Boys who relished the extension of the most danceable moments of popular soul and disco music. Early B-Boys and B-Girls would battle and through battling the various technical aspects of Breakdancing were honed and developed. There were several crews of young folk who participated in the development of Break Dancing. One of the earliest and now most legendary Breaking crews is the Rock Steady Crew. Bronx B-Boys (B-Boys/Girls are currently known as constituents of hip-hop culture that creatively participate in two or more primary elements of the culture), Jimmy D. and Jojo established the legendary Rock Steady Crew; joined by Crazy Legs and Lenny Len in 1979.

In addition to DJs and Breakdancers, there were also MCs at these early underground hip-hop jams. As a point of clarification, all MCs rap, but not all rappers are MCs. A rapper is an entertainer. An MC is an artist who is committed to perfecting the crafts of lyrical mastery and call-response audience interaction. MCs were not initially (as they are now) the front men and women of hip-hop culture. Noted MC, KRS ONE once remarked that as an MC he was happy to just carry his DJs crates. These days hip-hop culture, especially rap music, tends to marginalize most of the foundational elements of the culture and over emphasizes the role of the MC which stands for Master of Ceremonies. However, according to Rakim, an MC who is widely referred to simply as “the god,” MC means “move the crowd” or “Mic Control.” MCs hone their skills through freestyling and battling as well. Free style rhyming is when an MC raps without aid of previous rhymes committed to paper or memory. Much like their Jazz improvising counterparts, a free-styling MC pulls lyrical rifts and cadences from an ever-evolving repertoire in order to perform spontaneous rhymes that reflect their immediate environment and/or address the present opponent. Battling is when MCs engage in lyrical combat in a series of discursive turns. In fact, battles between MCs have become legendary and at times notoriously violent on and off record.

The final foundational element of hip-hop culture is represented by the graffiti artist. To many people, graffiti artist is an oxymoron. Graffiti is vandalism. It is against the law to spray paint names and images on public property. Somewhat unlike the other elements of hip-hop culture, graffiti completely predates the development of the other three elements. Graffiti actually dates back to the Old World, pre-modern times. But there are some distinct qualities to how and why graffiti has developed in hip-hop culture. The earliest documented Graf “tag” belongs to Greece born, Demetrius from 183 Street in the Bronx. He made himself famous by tagging Taki 183 throughout the five boroughs of NYC via subway trains. This moment is distinct for several reasons. (1) Considering hip-hop’s global prominence in the new millennium, the multi-cultural origins of hip-hop certainly explain some of its universal appeal. A Greek Graf writer fit in perfectly with a diverse array of cultural constituents, including African Americans, Jamaicans, West Indians, Puerto Ricans, Asians, Dominicans, Cubans, etc. (2) Several scholars have referred to much of the

activity of early adopters of hip-hop culture as a process of reclaiming public spaces.<sup>3)</sup> Sometimes this reclamation is done through sound; consider the boom box radios of yesteryear or the current boom-box-like sound systems in cars. But sometimes this is done through the writing of names and images on/in public spaces. (3) The use of the subway, as a means to circulate the tag, Taki 183, throughout the five boroughs was an underground masterstroke. It underscored the urge to manipulate public property and services for the benefit of youth culture and in particular here, the processes of self-identification amongst inner city youth.

If we were to simply define the underground as cultural practices that are not mainstream, then the early elemental developments of hip-hop (including DJ-ing, MC-ing, Graf-writing, and Break dancing) would all be considered underground. But this is not the only way to define the underground. The concept of the underground has many manifestations throughout the history of African American literature and culture. Drawing the connections between the underground(s) of hip-hop and the ways that the underground manifests itself in African American culture is the central subject matter of my first book, *The Hip Hop Underground and African American Culture: Beneath the Surface*.<sup>4)</sup> This comparison begins with the historical movement to subvert the oppressive forces of the institution of slavery in the United States; that movement is known as the Underground Railroad. Before my research the underground concepts in literature and rap music or hip-hop culture had not yet been connected to each other through a conceptual lineage. Moreover, the connections between these undergrounds and the signs, symbols and themes that string them together through black history had not been systematically studied and/or described. For example, one of the most important physical/tangible symbols connected to the Underground Railroad is the train and the train's most important theme or function; movement. Various Underground Railroad scholars and documentarians, including William Still, Henrietta Buckmaster, and others claim that the Underground Road was named so by the owner of a fugitive slave named Tice Davids.

It came about, according to those who were best informed, around 1831. A fugitive named Tice Davids crossed the river at Ripley (Ohio) under the expert guidance of those river operators who worked within sight of slavery. He was escaping from his Kentucky master, who followed so closely on his heels that Tice Davids had no alternative when he reached the river, but to swim. His master spent a little time searching for a skiff, but he never lost sight of his slave, bobbing about in the water. He kept him in sight all the way across the river and soon his skiff closing the distance between them. He saw Tice Davids wade into shore, and then—he never saw him again. He searched everywhere, he asked everyone, . . . Baffled and frustrated, he returned to Kentucky, and with wide eyes and shakings of the head he gave the only explanation possible for a sane man, “He must have gone on an underground road.”

“The phrase spread like a wind. And the friends of the fugitives completed the name in honor of the

steam trains that were nine-day marvels in the country. . . .”<sup>5)</sup> The language used to describe the newly invented trains (“nine-day marvels”) was refigured for the language used to describe the Underground Railroad. Thus, conductors, stations, depots, and the term train itself became signified vernacular variations of their standard counterparts. This phenomenon signaled the communications revolution that was already taking place in order for the Underground Railroad to operate at all. But for my purposes it also points to the importance of real life occurrences in understanding figurative spaces such as the underground and the ways that concepts of the underground re-emerge in hip-hop culture.

In addition to this important connection to the Underground Railroad movement, the concept of the underground in hip-hop culture is also related to a complex meditation on the underground in 20th century African American literature. In fact we can go as far back as Fredrick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) or Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium In Imperio* (1899) to see how concepts of and important allusions to the underground shape the foundations of African American literature. In his autobiography, for example, Douglass plainly captures the critical significance of the codes protected by cultural privacy. Here Douglass claims:

I have never approved of the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the underground railroad, but which, I think, by their open declarations, has been made most emphatically the upperground railroad . . . those open declarations are a positive evil to the slaves remaining who are seeking to escape.<sup>6)</sup>

For Douglass, public discourse that reveals the inner-workings of the Underground Railroad actually alerts slaveholders and slave catchers to the routes and escape plans or possibilities of perspective fugitives. He is speaking directly here to the prominence of several abolitionist writers whose literary exposures were threatening the secrecy of the Underground Railroad.

But one of the most intriguing sets of literary references to the underground comes from the mid-twentieth century writings of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Amiri Baraka. Richard Wright’s short story, “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1938), is essentially an early 20th century story about a young boy in the South who escapes his own lynching via a modern version of the Underground Railroad. However, Wright’s novella, “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942), establishes some of the core aspects of the hip-hop underground.<sup>7)</sup> Fred Daniels, the protagonist, is forced to confess to a crime he didn’t commit. In order to escape persecution from the police and a racist criminal justice system, Daniels journeys underground. While he lives underground he is able to reimagine the values and the value systems of mainstream society. Similarly, Ralph Ellison’s nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man* (1952) lives underground because he is alienated from mainstream society.<sup>8)</sup> Scenes from the prologue to *Invisible Man* actually inspired the cover art for *The Hip-Hop Underground and African American Culture* [Figure 1]. The protagonist in *Invisible*

*Man* claims to be socially invisible because he lives in a society where people refuse to acknowledge (or see) his full humanity. His experience as a young black man in mid-20th century America directly anticipates the experiences of young black folks in the hip-hop generation.

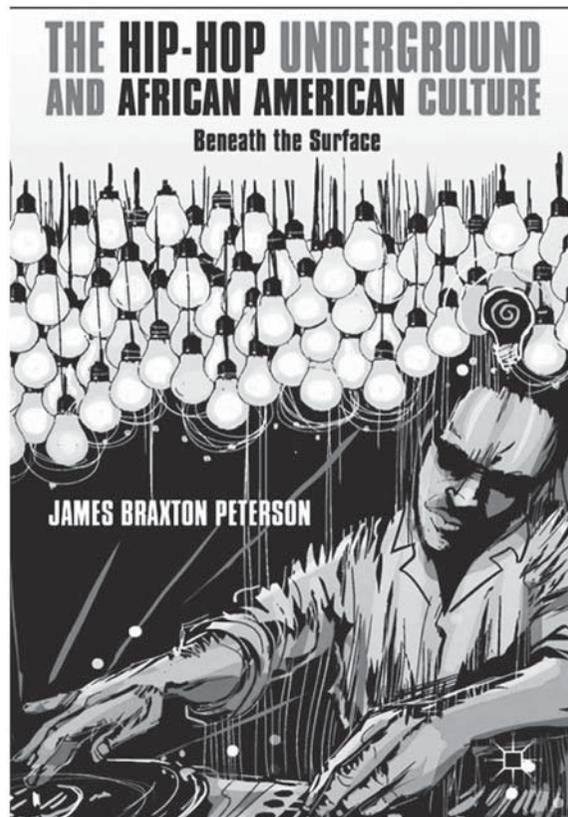


Figure 1

Amiri Baraka's work also contributes to these important connections and comparisons of the underground in hip-hop and in African American cultures. Baraka's classic Black Arts play, "Dutchman" (1964), features a protagonist, Clay, who rides a subway in New York City.<sup>9)</sup> He engages in an intense conversation with a white woman named Lula. Throughout their exchange it becomes clear that Clay hides his true feelings about being a young black man in a racist America. After inciting him to anger, Lula ultimately kills Clay and the play ends as the other riders on the subway help Lula dispose of Clay's dead body only to reset the scenario and await the next young black male victim. Wright, Ellison, and Baraka each contribute powerful ideas to the significance of the underground in African American culture and these ideas establish the foundations upon which the hip-hop underground rests.

In order to best explore how the conceptual structures of the underground operate within hip-hop, some additional definitions of the terms may be useful. In Yvonne Bynoe's *Encyclopedia of Rap*

*and Hip-Hop Culture*, the underground is defined as “a term to describe rap music that is not associated with a major record company, or that reflects the more diverse and often socially aware rap music and hip-hop culture developing around the United States but not usually promoted by commercial entertainment outlets, including radio and music video programs.”<sup>10)</sup> Bynoe’s definition is consistent with others who suggest that underground hip-hop has a resistant relationship to the mainstream music industry market(s) —resistance that takes the form of what Anthony Kwame Harrison and others refer to as a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach to producing, promoting, selling, and circulating the music.<sup>11)</sup> The definition then pivots to “more diverse” and “socially aware” content (presumably) in the lyrics. One challenge in defining a hip-hop underground or discerning what can and should be considered underground hip-hop is to make some determinations and provide some tools for evaluating generally what constitutes diverse and/or “socially aware” content. In *The Hip-Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose contributes some additional terms and concepts to this effort to define the underground: “In the battle over the politics of hip-hop, convention separates the commercial realm from conscious rap, with the latter largely considered part of ‘the underground.’ The distinctions made between the two tend to revolve loosely around whether or not a given artist has politically progressive content.”<sup>12)</sup> Opposing commercial and conscious may present a bind; the terms are not opposite in meaning yet within the context of the discourses on what constitutes underground hip-hop music, conscious content is often compared with and generally opposed to commercial music and content. For me this bind suggests a complex relationship between what is generally considered commercial/mainstream versus what is generally considered underground. Some scholars avoid this bind by focusing almost exclusively on underground music, venues, markets, and models on the west coast of the United States—that is specific places and/or spaces.<sup>13)</sup>

Marcyliena Morgan’s *The Real Hip-hop* locates its research focus on Project Blowed (a performance venue in LA) and hip-hop culture in the Los Angeles underground scene. Her work also wrestles with the complex nature of the underground especially (and conceptually) at the intersection of hip-hop and African American cultures.<sup>14)</sup> Morgan claims: “In hip-hop the term ‘underground’ is in reference to many symbols, all of which coalesce around flight, fight, and freedom. The underground simultaneously recalls the era of slavery, when a people summoned incredible desire and courage for a chance to exercise control over their own language and communication, creativity, body, culture, spiritual practice, and life itself. . . . [The underground] is the ultimate space and place of humanity.”<sup>15)</sup> Morgan’s claims about underground hip-hop articulate and inform my own. While her research focuses on particular places or spaces, this quote points to the importance of defining the hip-hop underground through the content of the lyrics in the music. The hip-hop underground’s recollection of the era of slavery and Morgan’s astute referencing of the themes of “flight, fight, and freedom” are, for me, the most important ways of thinking about the concept of the underground in hip-hop culture.

In conclusion I would like to return to an important aspect of Tricia Rose’s discussion on these

matters. Rose claims that “politically progressive content” is a factor around which distinctions about underground versus mainstream or commercial hip-hop “revolve.” This is an important point for understanding the central approaches to defining underground hip-hop music beyond the scope of market forces and geographic locations—that is, defining underground hip-hop on its own terms. “Politically progressive content” would be, generally speaking, those lyrics that made political statements and assertions, critiqued socioeconomic conditions, and/or directly embraced themes of social justice. And for me, these are the most significant lyrical and artistic aspects of the underground in hip-hop culture.

One example that illustrates a poignant sense of what underground hip-hop music can be is the song called “Praying Man” by the artist named Big K.R.I.T. featuring B. B. King. “Praying Man” was recorded as a part of K.R.I.T.’s *Live from the Underground* album released in 2012.<sup>16</sup> Each of the three verses reflects some aspects of the roots of African American history in the United States: lynching, Middle Passage, and the Underground Railroad. Although the album as a whole might not be categorized as an underground hip-hop record because of its mainstream appeal and distribution, Big K.R.I.T. is committed to a certain underground ethos clearly through his lyrics and the themes of black resistance in “Praying Man.”<sup>17</sup> For me this is the archetype of underground hip-hop.

## Notes

- 1) My research roughly defines the three eras of hip-hop culture as follows: (1) the Old School Era (from the mid-1970s to the 1980s), (2) the Golden Age (from the mid-1980s to 1998), and (3) the Platinum Era (from 1998 to the present).
- 2) See David Toop, *Rap Attack, No. 3: African Rap to Global Hip Hop* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1999).
- 3) See Houston Baker, Jr., *Black Studies, Rap and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), and/or Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994).
- 4) James Braxton Peterson, *The Hip-Hop Underground and African American Culture: Beneath the Surface* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).
- 5) Henrietta Buckmaster, *Let My People Go: The Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolition Movement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 59.
- 6) William L. Andrews, ed., *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.
- 7) Richard Wright, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938, New York: First Harper Perennial, 1991); “The Man Who Lived Underground” [first published 1942], in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (1997, New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 1436-1470.
- 8) Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952, New York: Vintage International, 1995).
- 9) Amiri Baraka, “Dutchman,” in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1946-1960.
- 10) Yvonne Bynoe, *Encyclopedia of Rap and Hip-Hop Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005), 397.
- 11) Anthony Kwame Harrison, *The Hip Hop Underground: Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

- 12) Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop War: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008), 241.
- 13) See, for instance, Marcyliena Morgan, *The Real Hiphop: Battling for Knowledge, Power, and Respect in the LA Underground* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Harrison, *The Hip Hop Underground*.
- 14) In the interest of full disclosure, Professor Morgan was on my dissertation committee. Although I trained at the University of Pennsylvania, Professor Morgan (Harvard University) graciously agreed to provide outstanding support, critique, and advice on my dissertation writing and research. My dissertation, *Concepts of the Underground in Black Culture* (UPENN 2003) is an early precursor to my book.
- 15) Morgan, *The Real Hiphop*, 16.
- 16) Big K.R.I.T. featuring B. B. King, "Praying Man," in *Live from the Underground* (Def Jam, 2012).
- 17) For a more in-depth discussion and analysis of the song, see Peterson, *The Hip-Hop Underground*, 77-81.