

### **Performing Rebellion:**

#### **Rep & Rev, Hip-Hop and Youth Resistance in the Bronx, 1970's-1980's**

The Bronx during the mid 1970's through 1980's was a place where Black and Brown youth were fostering a culture of expression and resistance through the creation and utilization of Hip-Hop culture. During this time, the Bronx was suffering from a combination of different issues, beginning with the "white flight"<sup>1</sup>, which was the large scale move-out of whites out of the Bronx due to the influx of people of color and the formation of Black and Brown communities. Building owners would begin to disregard essential maintenance and repairs on these buildings because they held a fear of investing money to maintain these properties, fueled by their racist belief that the "neighborhood would go downhill"<sup>2</sup> with these Communities of Color's arrival. Tenants were left "without heat and water"<sup>3</sup> which prompted mass move-outs, leaving buildings close to empty. This led to the eventual abandonment and destruction of buildings by strippers and ultimately demolition by arsonists hired by the "slumlords" themselves in order to cash in on insurance policies.<sup>4</sup> These housing issues combined with a complete cut of "public services, housing programs and red-lining"<sup>5</sup> by the local government constitutes what is known as organized abandonment in the Bronx. In addition to this abandonment, there was also the overzealous policing by the State of New York on the Black and Brown youth of the Bronx with the criminalization of their bodies and their existence in public spaces. Regardless of these difficult circumstances, it did not stop the youth in the Bronx from finding ways of reclaiming agency over the streets they lived on and the bodies they inhabited in the face of daily oppression.

Hip-Hop allowed youth to create artistic performances that acted as forms of public resistance through a wide variety of different mediums. The Black and Brown youth of the Bronx created Hip Hop culture, which included “DJing, MCing, Graffiti and B-Boying”<sup>6</sup>, as an outlet for artistic and creative expression in a period plagued with turmoil. Ritchie “Crazy Legs” Colon, a B-Boyer and head of the Rock Steady Crew during the rise of Hip-Hop culture in the late 70’s, describes how he was blown away when he first walked onto the scene and saw the taggers, the dancers and the DJ’s all coming together and creating this youth society. While these individual artforms may have existed in some way previously, it was “only within the seven-mile circle did all these youth movements come together the way Crazy Legs had experienced it.”<sup>7</sup> The historical circumstances of abandonment mixed with the need for artistic expression from the youth made the Bronx the perfect breeding ground for the “revolutionary aesthetic”<sup>8</sup> that is Hip-Hop. There was one overarching form of cultural expression that linked all these groups of youth together and it was utilized as method of enhancing their public perception, their fashion style. All four of these aspects of Hip Hop culture are heavily and directly influenced by the repetition and revision seen in Black culture and music, or “Rep & Rev”<sup>9</sup> as coined by Suzan Lori-Parks. We will be seeing how the use of Rep and Rev throughout each medium of Hip-Hop culture served to act not only as a form of creative expression, but also as a form of public resistance against the policing and abandonment they faced. Through the use of their art, their bodies and the clothing draped on it, these youth exuberated confidence during these public performances, and by doing so they reclaimed agency of their public perception and spaces.

By focusing on the application of Suzan Lori-Parks' Rep & Rev to Hip-Hop as performance and resistance, I hope to ground this paper in "...an integral part of African and African-American literary and oral traditions."<sup>10</sup> Forms of everyday resistance by Youth of Color have been studied before, but in this paper I hope to build upon existing cultural histories of working class resistance by viewing Hip-Hop as form of resistance created and utilized by youth jointly through a Performance Studies lens. I will be pulling historical context of the Bronx during this time period from the work of David Chang and Tricia Rose in their respective studies of the history of Hip-Hop. Their insight will allow me to create the tie between Black and Brown youth culture and performance as a method of resistance. Like Luis Alvarez and other cultural historians have argued, youth existing in public spaces in ways that are counter-normative to societal expectations acts as a powerful method of resistance in the public sphere as these youth are able to craft their own identities and "reclaiming dignity"<sup>11</sup> of their perceptions. In line with the idea of reclaiming perceptions, Performance Studies academic Daphne Brooks offers an examination of dissent in performance culture through the use of "...off center identity formations to disrupt the ways in which they were perceived...", or what she calls "empowering oddness"<sup>12</sup>. This is seen in the ways youth were able to collectively create this new multimedia artform and culture that is Hip-Hop. My examination builds upon the work of these scholars offering a new application of their work to Hip-Hop culture by tying together Cultural and Performance Studies, while simultaneously grounding the paper in African American Theatre, as a unique interpretation of performance as resistance. In this paper, I will demonstrate that Hip-Hop culture is the epitome of youth-led artistic resistance in the United States because of it's ability to encapsulate the narratives of struggle had by Black and Brown

youth. It's use in transforming public perception of youth while simultaneously allowing a rescripting of the methods in which these youth claimed dignity, agency and confidence show how Hip-Hop is more than a musical or cultural phenomenon, it is a powerful tool of resistance.

The youth of the Bronx during the 1970's were dealing with the politics and repercussions that came with organized abandonment in the Bronx and heightened policing of their bodies and spaces which they occupied. Their neighborhood was dealing with a variety of issues from the top down, and these youth longed for a way of reclaiming their bodies and their surroundings. The rise of neoliberalism affected the government's decision making in how resources would be allocated and where cuts would be made, and the Bronx would receive the brunt of the damage. The building of the Cross Bronx Expressway since the early 1950's forced the destruction of many homes and small businesses that were primarily Black and Brown owned, leading to their displacement into public housing in the South Bronx.<sup>13</sup> By this point in time, the Bronx had lost over half a million manufacturing jobs and the youth unemployment rate was "closer to 80 percent"<sup>14</sup>, leaving little opportunity for job security or advancement. In addition to the major displacements happening, "slumlords" had begun to take control of the public housing buildings and they were cutting corners however they could manage, from dodging taxes to neglecting tenants.<sup>15</sup> The last stage of this abandonment process would be the destruction of the building for the insurance money, best put by Jack Newfield in the quote "In housing, the last stage of capitalism is arson."<sup>16</sup> As the city was burning away, the government offered no support, instead choosing to shrink public services from fire, transit and education, which began at budget cuts and ended in complete shutdowns of schools, arts and music programs. leaving youth with little to no creative outlets in which to express their frustrations

and self-image. The mix of corrupt public housing with a lack of jobs and little to no public services set the stage for the complete neglect of the Bronx. The lack of social services and accessible public spaces such as rec centers and schools were virtually non-existent, so the youth were left no option but to turn to the streets as a place to exist. This came with its own challenges, as the police would enter their neighborhoods and harass these youth for merely existing in the public sphere. For example, personal accounts of youth such as one Frankie Mercado describe how in the early 70's if "They see more than three of us walking, they would arrest us for unlawful assembly."<sup>17</sup> This overzealous policing would break down the dignity of the youth living in these neighborhoods, leaving a feeling of resentment and igniting a spirit of resistance. One Bronx teen was interviewed on a local news saying "The enemy around the Bronx now at this very moment, is the policemen."<sup>18</sup> With no where to turn inside while simultaneously being policed outside, youth were stuck in a society that did not want their existence to be seen, recognized or valued. In a New York Times article from 1973, a policeman describes the "...rubblestrewn, graffiti-splattered, disease-ridden streets of the South Bronx"<sup>19</sup> as a wasteland. But this new generation in the South Bronx was not to be so easily categorized, as they turned to the rising culture of Hip-Hop to reclaim their power over their voice, their bodies and their perception in the spaces they inhabited.

Repetition and Revision was a crucial element in the formation of Hip Hop culture and style, allowing for the creation of a community of artists who were reclaiming the ways in which they were perceived. Each young artist and performer would have their niche or specialty in the culture, cultivating their unique style that was built by influences around them, as a hopes of standing apart from the crowd and creating their own lens to be perceived from. Rep & Rev was

an integral part of how these youth developed their individual styles, as they would take influence from their surroundings and their cohort then add their own flair to it to make it uniquely theirs. This usage of Rep & Rev can be seen across all three mediums, from music to graffiti and b-boying. In DJing, The Hip-Hop pioneer DJ Kool Herc was influenced by the impressive sound systems blasting dancehall that he witnessed in his upbringing in Kingston, Jamaica while simultaneously embracing American Funk and Soul during his teenage years in the Bronx. In turn, he used both influences when he was creating his signature mixing sound of break beats that would be known as a foundation of Hip-Hop music.<sup>20</sup> Herc's signature use of breaks in the beats and its repetition of these Black soul and White rock records created the musical space where Hip-Hop took flight.<sup>21</sup> Graffiti artists of the 70's would tag their names across the bare walls of the city as a way of reclaiming their city streets with their unique style that set them apart from others. Hugo Martinez, founder of United Graffiti Artists in 1972, speaks on how "Graffiti writing is a way of gaining status in a society where to own property is to have identity."<sup>22</sup> These youth were able to make the alleys, the trains, even the Statue of Liberty<sup>22</sup> their own canvases, spreading their own style to stand above the "hundreds of kids who were scaling barbed wire fences.. and running from police just to piece cars in the trainyards in ever bolder detail and wilder style."<sup>23</sup> Even the b-boys who would take to street corners and parties to show off their skills were using their flair and style through movement to break down traditional dance structures and creating new fluid structures for dance." While it was heavily influenced by a variety of dances from the Lindy Hop to Brazilian capoeira, B-Boying was unique in that it was created in "a very specific time and place."<sup>24</sup> Crazy Legs remembers how "We didn't know what the fuck no capoeira was! We were in the ghetto! There were no

dance schools, nothing.”<sup>25</sup> B-Boys recreated their own rotations, drops and freezes in their unique style separate from what all their peers were doing, encapsulating “the entire history of hip hop with a virtuoso display of style.”<sup>26</sup> Repetition and Revision served as the tool throughout each of these mediums which youth used to develop their individual style and by doing so, they were actively reclaiming their own agency and dignity by creating new lenses for being perceived through their art.

With the wide range of avenues in Hip Hop culture that allowed youth to express themselves came the existence of a community that offered inspiration, competition and most importantly, a sense of empowerment. The Hip-Hop community has always been one of collaboration, pushing one another forward in hopes of becoming the best, the most unique or the most revered. Each aspect depended on one another to exist, for example Hip-Hop music as we know today would not exist if DJ’s never invited MC’s on stage with them in the first place. DJ Cool Herc’s break beats provided the space for B-Boys to shine and show out, and the parties he hosted created the space for taggers, dancers, rappers “to strut their stuff and make their names”<sup>27</sup> The collective contribution of each of these young artists building off one another is what ended up creating such a vast community of performers. These youth were being inspired by one another and empowering each other to constantly revise their style and perfect their artform as they took to the streets to perform. But with such a wide array of skills and styles being created in this period, the need for “distinguishing yourself and your originality above the crowd”<sup>28</sup> was a key component in Hip-Hop culture as each performer revised their influences to have their own style that set them apart from the other youth also tagging, mixing or dancing. Being that the public sphere was the only avenue available for these youth to

express themselves, it wasn't just about being great at their artform or having a unique style, it was making sure that the world knew they were great and unique as well. At first it was just for their peers and their neighborhood to take notice, eventually it was for the entirety of New York and beyond. Hip Hop put you on a "relentless quest to prove to them that you were bigger, wilder and bolder than circumstances dictated you should ever be."<sup>29</sup> These public performances were important for these youth because for the first time, they were able to define their own narrative instead of having the outside world define them. The need to reframe the ways in which they were being perceived was due to the fact that these youth were being abandoned just the way that the buildings in the Bronx were and were being policed even more excruciatingly as the bounds of their art expanded. For example, this can be seen by the 24 million dollar budget for police and fences used by the Transit Authority to beef up security in Train-Yards in the hopes of stooping graffiti artists from putting up pieces.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the obstacles, when these youth collectively took to the streets to perform and to create, they were inherently reclaiming agency over the public sphere of where they existed and where their art was being perceived. These youth made sure that they were being recognized, whether it be from the bass that would be thumping through entire buildings and street corners to the tags that would move through the city on the subways, breaking down the cultural expectations that these youth should be "invisible".

I believe that this community of youth collectively taking to the streets to perform is a prime example of what Daphne Brooks calls "empowering oddness".<sup>31</sup> These youth were developing "...a means to move more freely and be culturally "odd", to turn the tables on normativity and employ their own bodies as canvases of dissent."<sup>32</sup> By not following and staying



in their “place” in society through the reclaiming of their own bodies and artistic voices, these alienated youth were inherently expressing themselves against the current social and cultural norms, offering a “dissonant relationship to dominant culture”<sup>33</sup> and a method to subvert their dismissal in the public sphere. This singular search for their own “oddness” was so intertwined with one another’s journeys that these youth ended up constructing a community of individuals all searching for their place in the canvas of oddness that is Hip-Hop. Tying back to Crazy Legs, Jeff Chang illustrates how it was “Perhaps only within the seven mile circle (of the Bronx) did all these youth movements come together the way that Crazy Legs experienced it.”<sup>34</sup> By having a community of artists that grew alongside each other and Rep & Rev’d each other’s styles, these youth developed a sense of communal empowerment that launched the Hip-Hop community into the public discourse. These combined elements provide the means for “ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena.”<sup>35</sup> By having this strength in numbers and spirit of resistance among thousands of youth, the Hip-Hop community created their own narrative and changed their perception from society into one of their own making, not one being employed upon them, ultimately shaking up the social norms and status of their existence.

The youth who were participating in Hip-Hop’s culture of art and performance were not only using their artistic abilities to resist, they used their clothing and fashion style as a method of resistance as well. The use of fashion commodities as stylistic expression and dissonance shows how “Hip-Hop artists use style as a form of identity formation that plays on class distinctions and hierarchies by using commodities to claim the cultural terrain.”<sup>36</sup> By using their clothes and style, youth were able to critique and redefine cultural norms while existing in the

public spaces they performed in or inhabited. The use of jewelry has been a part of Hip-Hop culture from an early point in its existence, seen in early rap album covers such as Kurtis Blow's self titled debut from 1980 where his gold chains form the majority of his outfit. As jewelry has always been tied to those with wealth or those with high status, it was infuriating for those who could afford 24K gold jewelry to see teenagers rocking identical replicas that cost them a penny in comparison to the cost of the real one. This was in essence a mockery of "the gold fetish in Western trade"<sup>37</sup> and a way of redefining who could possess "expensive" styles. These youth were never expected to be dressed in designer and covered in jewelry, much less to be seen in public as an outright mockery of consumerism. The same concept is seen in the fashion styles of B-boys and B-girls who would wear fake Gucci and various other designers then strut down the block passing ladies who paid 5<sup>th</sup> street prices for the "real" thing.<sup>38</sup> This form of resistance through consumerist critiques is what Tricia Rose calls "sartorial warfare"<sup>39</sup> and it was an effective technique for these youth in their quest for their status and identity while simultaneously disrupting the public sphere. The youth were existing in such a rebellious way and constantly revising and adapting new methods of visual performance to meet their own goals, simultaneously creating new status quos of what these youth were allowed and expected to do. Forms of sartorial warfare by Black and Brown youth can be seen since back in the 50's through the youth's donning of Zoot Suits as a form of cultural expression and social rebellion. Those youth, just like the youth of the Bronx, wore their clothes with pride and confidence in the face of oppression and public disdain in what Luis Alvarez coins the usage of "body politics of dignity."<sup>40</sup> The use of their bodies and the clothing draped on it as a method to gain dignity and construct their own narratives fought against the negative views society had built upon

these youth by reconstructing the social norms. By disrupting the public sphere through their fashion, youth like Crazy Legs were able to challenge “their invisibility and silence”<sup>41</sup> that was expected from non-white youth. While it may have not been the explicit intention, fashion choices have been used by youth in Hip-Hop culture to subvert cultural norms and create new narratives for existing in public, reclaiming “at least a part of the dignity that the world in which they live has taken away from them.”<sup>42</sup>

Just as Rep and Rev was an integral part of Hip-Hop’s artistic origins, it was also a crucial form of how these youth were creating their own fashion styles and using them for resistance in public. Youth culture and dress attire changed over the years in the Hip-Hop scene as there were new ideas and styles reaching prominence one right after another. Beginning with the cut off jackets that was drawn from the gang era of the Bronx, graffiti artists would customize these torn jackets by tagging them up, creating individual art pieces worn on people’s backs.<sup>43</sup> Not only were graffiti artists able to create new art pieces themselves, their artistic style would now be seen on jackets across the Bronx, leading to inspiration for other artists to develop their specific style of graffiti themed clothing. Rep & Rev is seen when looking at youth fashion as a whole, or as Suzan Lori-Parks puts it, “Rep & Rev are key in examining more than one moment. Rep & Rev create space for metaphor.”<sup>44</sup> While the physical clothes that make up these youth’s outfits may be nothing more than fabric and looking at them individually may offer little information, the metaphor of many youth existing in clothes that exude confidence and promote new creativity is that resistance is multifaceted, it can be through violent protest or it can be through clothing choices. Regardless, each method of resistance is powerful in its own

way and offers its own benefits on how it affects public perception and allows youth to reclaim agency of their bodies and dignity of their selves.

The Bronx in the mid 1970's – 1980's was a place which provided the circumstances for the Black and Brown youth-led creation of Hip-Hop culture. The neighborhood was dealing with the organized abandonment by the local government in which public services were cut, public housing was run like a scam and policing was at an all time high. Youth lacked spaces for artistic expression both in schools and in the neighborhood, so they took to the streets as a place where they could freely create and express themselves. Hip-Hop culture embodies a variety of artistic mediums, from its music to B-Boying and Graffiti, and was created by youth through a repetition of one another's styles but with a revision to make it their own in hopes of standing apart from the rest. This is what Suzan Lori-Parks coins as Rep & Rev in the world of African American theatre, but I argue it is an integral part of Hip-Hop culture as well. The use of Rep & Rev in Hip-Hop culture allowed the plethora of youth in the Bronx to develop their individual styles, defining their own perceptions and creating their own narratives through their art. They were able to fight against the abandonment and policing of their bodies and selves in which they were expected to remain invisible and conformed through their participation and creation of the culture. The community based growth of this culture is an example of what Daphne Brooks calls empowering oddness, where youth would communally use their bodies as a tool for dissent. Not only were they able to do this through their art, but through their fashion as well. Their fashion style and clothing were draped upon these youth's bodies as paint covers a canvas, it was a unification of art and existence. Through their wearing of fake jewelry and designer clothes, these youth were engaging in a form of "sartorial warfare" against the

Western, capitalistic expectation that only the wealthy were to be dressed in “class”. By using their art and their fashion as a critique of social norms and expectations, these youth were reclaiming agency over the ways in which they were perceived while simultaneously reclaiming dignity of their own bodies, in what Luis Alvarez coins the “body politics of dignity.” Hip-Hop provided youth with a community full of empowerment, a variety of methods for artistic creation and a tool for resistance that allowed them to reclaim their bodies and their surroundings. While previously thrown aside as a youth phenomenon with no major contribution to society, I argue that Hip-Hop has been the epitome of Black and Brown youth-led culture and resistance in the United States due to its unique origin, its under-served participants and the ways in which it has been utilized by them. This study is necessary because if it is just blown aside like generations of academics have done before, we will not see the true ability of youth’s ability to create, perform and resist. Just as Crazy Legs looks back and was blown away by the community he saw being fostered in front of his very eyes, youth and others like myself continuously experience this same amazement upon investment in Hip-Hop culture, and I hope that this paper serves to attract as many others as possible to the wonders of Hip-Hop.

## Bibliography

1. Black Noise – pg 31
2. [Housing Abandonment Spreads In Bronx and Parts of Brooklyn - The New York Times](#)  
([nytimes.com](#))
3. Can't Stop Won't Stop – Pg 13
4. Can't Stop Won't Stop – Pg 13
5. [Housing Abandonment Spreads In Bronx and Parts of Brooklyn - The New York Times](#)  
([nytimes.com](#))
6. Cant Stop – Page 110
7. Can't Stop – Pg 110-111
8. Cant Stop – Page 111
9. Essays – Suzan Lori Parks
10. Essays – Suzan Lori Parks
11. Power of the Zoot – Luis Alvarez
12. Bodies in Dissent – Daphne Brooks
13. Cant Stop Wont Stop – Pg 11
14. Cant Stop Wont Stop – Pg 13
15. Cant Stop Wont Stop – Pg 13
16. Joe Canosan & Jack Newfield, "The Men Who Are Burning New York", Village Voice(June 2, 1980), 1, 15-19. Jack Newfield, "A Budget for BANKERS AND Arsonists", Village Voice (June 2, 1980), 13
17. Cant Stop Wont Stop 62
18. Cant Stop Wont Stop 62

19. [Housing Abandonment Spreads In Bronx and Parts of Brooklyn - The New York Times](#)

[\(nytimes.com\)](#)

20. Cant Stop Wont Stop – 79

21. Cant Stop Wont Stop – 79

22. Cant Stop Wont Stop 118

23. Cant Stop Wont Stop 119

24. Cant Stop Wont Stop 116

25. Cant Stop Wont Stop 116

26. Cant Stop Wont Stop 118

27. Cant Stop Wont Stop 80

28. Cant Stop Wont Stop 111

29. Cant Stop Wont Stop 111

30. Black noise – 45

31. Bodies in Dissent – 6

32. Bodies in Dissent – 6

33. Bodies in Dissent – 6

34. Cant Stop – Page 111

35. Black Noise - 39

36. Black Noise – 36

37. Black Noise – 38

38. Black noise – 38

39. Black noise – 38

40. Zoot Suit - 9

41. Zoot Suit – 242

42. Zoot Suit- 243

43. Cant Stop – 42

44. Elements of Style - 9