

## Breaking the Cycle

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On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation making slavery in the rebellious states illegal (Brinkley 380). Two years following the Emancipation Proclamation, in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States' Constitution made slavery illegal in the United States (Brinkley 337). In 1866, the Fourteenth Amendment defined citizenship and gave blacks equal protection under the law (Brinkley 412). The notorious Jim Crow Laws which held African Americans in metaphorical shackles are long gone. In the years following 1965, Affirmative Action took hold and gave African Americans an equal opportunity in the workforce or, in some cases, more than equal, as companies try to meet quotas. On paper, things seem to be fair, but according to the *Statistical Abstract of The United States*, economically the differences are still there. Out of 83,698,000 white households, 7.8% make \$10,000 or less a year and 2.7% bring an income of \$200,000 or more. On the other hand, out of 12,043,000 black households, 19% make \$10,000 or less and .85% make an income of \$200,000 or more. The average income for white households is \$44,687. African American households have an average income of \$29,423 (*United States* 671). These figures do not show equality in any way.

An article printed in the *Connecticut Post Online* stated, "Over the past 40 years, the Economic Policy Institute's research reveals the wealth gap between the net worth of the top earning households and minority ones widened 50 percent" (Brown). The cause of this inequality is not governmental policies; in fact, government policies are in place which give African

Americans the edge in the work place. The culprit which causes the inequality stems from an ever-present, perpetual cycle which causes the African American community to be encircled in a self-deprecating, black society. The cycle is made up of many components such as drugs, lack of motivation for education, teenage pregnancy, black on black hatred, and more. The pieces of this dismal puzzle fall into place and keep the cycle going. Many factors add to the cycle such as environment and complacency. The vulgarity of the hip-hop movement is a major factor in perpetuating the cycle and keeping the problem of inequality present.

Hip-hop adds to the major components of the cycle without the slightest hint of remorse. Surprisingly similar to Hollywood, sex and scandal sell in the hip-hop industry. Today's rappers do not comprehend the impact of their words and actions. They spread the vulgarities of drugs, sex, and sectionalist violence to the masses of young blacks trying to figure a way out of the urban settings. The young blacks, in a sense, see this glorified road as an easy way out of a tough situation. They start living the life, and it directly or indirectly leads to gang violence, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse. Teen pregnancy is perpetuated every time a rapper sensationalizes sex as a way to make money and to better oneself. The babies born to parents who are young and do not have the educational background because of the life they live or poor school systems, are likely to be exposed to the hip-hop music and the cycle begins again. The cycle itself is a problem, but it is far too big to tackle as a whole. One must cripple the cycle by taking out the factors that fuel the components and stop it at its source. Something has to be done about the message hip-hop music is sending to young blacks and young Americans in general.

One way to deal with this problem is to educate the parents to the problem hip-hop music causes. Parents are the ones who, in theory, filter what goes into the senses of their young children. Using community awareness meetings, parents would be informed about the message

rap music is presenting to their children. If parents knew about the vulgarity and the undercurrents of the cycle which exist, chances are they would not agree to their child being exposed to such vulgarities. History has seen the effect of parental influence on society. Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or MADD, provides various programs and information about the dangers of drinking and driving. If the parents were educated, an organization like MADD could teach others about the degenerative effects of rap music. Likewise, if young, black parents are educated about the harmful effects of hip-hop and about hip-hop's contribution to the cycle which is harming the black society, maybe they will realize the importance of limiting exposure to their children.

In 1985, the words "explicit lyrics" on a "Tipper Sticker" were made mandatory by the Recording Industry Association of America, on records containing vulgar lyrics. The sticker is known as a "Tipper Sticker" because of Parents Music Resource Center member, Tipper Gore ("Parental Advisory"). However, these stickers are rarely enforced, and in most cases, it is not illegal for a minor to purchase a compact disc with this label. On April 1, 1985, the sale of cigarettes to people under age eighteen became illegal in all fifty states because of the harmful effects of smoking ("Cigarettes"). Unlike "Tipper Sticker" violations, there are huge fines for stores that sell tobacco products to anyone under eighteen. A simple Federal Communication Commission sanction could make penalties for selling explicit lyrics fitting to the harm the vulgarity causes. However, a penalty should not be the only motivation. Stores such as Wal-mart refuse to sell explicit material and should be given some incentive to keep the policy of not selling vulgarity a priority.

Great lyricists do not exist anymore. In an article in *USA TODAY*, Nas, one of the lyricists known for spreading a positive message states, "You've got to enjoy life and the

American dream, but at the same time you can't let money run you" ("Who Killed Hip-Hop"). Nas is one of the few who realizes sex and scandal sell, but are not what is best for young blacks. According to the same article, Nas says, "The industry has sucked the life out of rap music with an overemphasis on money making and thug imagery" ("Who Killed Hip-Hop"). If more people in the industry could develop this mindset and realize that making money is not the key and stop preying on the easily-influenced minds of young blacks, the change would come from the source. On VH1's *Ego Trip the White Rapper Show*, the situation was played out clearly. The winner was the rapper which had the trickiest rhyme patterns and not the one who had the lyrics and the song. The judges thought the lyricist's rhymes would not be popular in today's industry. Positive lyrics should become a crucial part in the hip-hop world. Money is what drives the industry, and there should be a tax incentive given to producers who produce artists that promote positive images. If producers and rappers realize their roles, this can be done, and a step toward crippling the cycle can begin.

If the industry changes to a more positive lyric driven system, it will have the greatest impact. Of course, it all comes down to education and educating the parents, young parents, and even children, but if there were no cycle perpetuated by greedy industry producers, there would be no need to educate the public. Furthermore, teens have a certain tendency to rebel against their parent's wishes. Teaching just the parents would not help, and teaching the young ones something they do not want to hear is difficult. Changing the mindset of producers and educating them on the cycle would decrease the need of "Tipper Stickers." Explicit material or words could be censored out and the sticker will be removed, but the vulgar message is still present. Today, some albums which need parental advisories do not have them, and some which do not need them, have them. The system is too flawed at this point to solve the problem. The only way to

solve the problem is to change the mindset of the producers and artists themselves. Changing the image of hip-hop would break the cycle.

Recently, people have asked, “Why is it such a big deal that there are two black coaches in the Superbowl?” Also, other people have asked, “Why is it a big deal that Barack Obama has a legitimate shot at winning the presidency?” These questions arise from people who do not understand the struggle which is caused by this cycle. These prominent black figures have overcome the cycle which hinders and dooms a large percentage of African Americans before they have a chance. The cycle is self-perpetuating, and African Americans who want to fight for equality should practice introspection and determine whether or not they are contributing to the components of the cycle. A reform of the hip-hop industry is only a small piece of the puzzle, but in the long run, it is a crucial part in overcoming the cycle. Hopefully, one day soon, the United States will not make a commotion about a successful black figure because the cycle will have slowed to a halt.

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