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Black Popular Culture

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Media Critique

Black Popular Culture is culture that envelops the ideals and history of an oppressed people, allowing them to share their own lived experiences through the development of complex media that reflects the times of its creation and the feelings of its creators and participants. It is a platform that has allowed black people to be able to make money from their image and become role models for youth of similar backgrounds, while also negotiating the stereotypes that are placed on them by the hegemonic powers of American society. As Stuart Hall states of popular culture, “what we are talking about is the struggle over cultural hegemony, it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it.” (Hall 106). One person who took advantage of this opportunity to redefine the image of blackness as it relates to the dominant powers is Joey Badass, a rapper who was born in 1995 and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Joey was influenced by many artists before him and gained an appreciation for music at a very young age. In 2017 he released his second studio album, *All-Amerikkkan Bada$$* during a time where police brutality was very prominent in the news and when black people were coming together to protest this oppression. The title of the album intentionally misspells America to include three K’s, in order to bring light to the relationship between the racist ideologies of the Ku Klux Klan and leaders of the country.

One song that stands out in particular is “Babylon.” This song, like other songs on the album, discusses racial injustices that inflict black people on a daily basis in the United States and calls for unity among the people in order to create change and modify the current hegemonic dynamics present in society. E. Patrick Johnson states, “the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘black’ culture” (Johnson 2). This song represents blackness with every part of production, from his tone, to the sounds used in the beat, and even with his tone and the genre of the music. The beat behind the song has police sirens that happen in intervals, which for many of the intended audience is a jarring sound to hear that could even cause anxiety in some. There are also horn sounds, which can be saxophones to relate to the days of the jazz men and the redefining of black masculinity. Throughout the production, there is also snapping and humming, or using the body and voice as instruments which is typical of black culture. Joey’s tone on the song is almost angry, calling out all the oppressive forces and giving out an inspiring feeling to the listener. It does an amazing job at using these to show contrast to the racist ideologies he mentions with the lyrics. Douglas Kellner defines ideology as, “serving to reproduce social relations of domination and subordination by providing a way in which the world can be viewed and is typically made to seem natural” (Kellner 7) This song provides good lessons about the racial ideologies of the country and sheds lights on many of the injustices that take place in American culture, all while allowing the listener to learn about the way black people are treated through the discussion of governmental abuse, institutional racism and black excellence in the form of unity and rebellion.

Throughout the song, Joey Badass alludes to the ways the government of the united states takes advantage of black people. Joey says, “nowadays they hangin' us by a different tree, Branches of the government, I can name all three, judicial, legislative and executive, Lock your pops away, your moms, then next the kids, It's all consecutive, I'm just tryna break the cycle, I wonder if I'll do it all before they take my life, yo” (Bada$$). Here Joey is showing the relationship of lynching to the way the government uses its power to essentially take peoples lives. By enacting racist policy and legislature, the government can suppress the voices and actions of many minority groups while simultaneously giving more power to white people, making it harder for change to be made. While all this is happening, there is also racism in the voting systems, which can vastly affect how many of these policies are put into place and which laws will be enacted in certain areas, allowing the dominant white powers to continue and control minority groups. When minorities try to fight back against these policies, they can be met with strict punishment by the judicial system, which can lead to further suppression of groups.

The judicial system is easily identifiable as a racialized structure that disproportionately affects the lives of black people in America. Sara Doude discusses the background of disparities between races in her essay and one fact she states is, “when analyzing the ratios of incarceration, Black men are imprisoned at seven times the rate of White men, and Black women are imprisoned at three times the rate of White women (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2012)” (Doude 218). This is due to many variables as she discusses, some of which are the representation of African Americans in media and the way their upbringings are framed vs those of their white counter parts. Sonja Starr, a University of Michigan Law professor, concludes, “. Black male defendants in federal criminal cases receive much longer prison sentences than white men do. In federal courts, the average sentence during 2008 and 2009 was 55 months for whites and 90 months for black” (Starr 1321). Not only do black people get sentenced more often, they also receive longer sentences. Joey is mentioning this in the second part of the quote, where he is talking about the constant cycle that black people face in the American judicial system. It is a cycle of imprisonment that has yet to be broken and has afflicted the black community for many years.

Black people are affected by more than just the government, they are affected by the many stuctures and institutions which underly our society, such as the policing of communities and the people who fund the fundamentally racist structures. In the second verse, Joey says, “Who you think investin' in penitentiaries though? Same owners as them labels, same owners of your cable, Spoon feedin' you fables, tryna keep your mind stable” (Bada$$). Joey is talking about the investment into private prisons and how the top 1% as well as many major companies hold these investments to profit off of the imprisonment of people in society. It has been rumored that companies who own record labels invest into private prisons, however detailed research has yet to be found so the correlation is not absolute. Another way that the cycle of oppression and imprisonment occurs is through education. Particularly in poor, urban environments, but other places as well, there is what is known as a school to prison pipeline. This is a structure that disproportionately punishes students of color and gives them harsher punishment than their white peers. Research by Nancy Heitzeg shows “The School to Prison Pipeline disproportionately impacts the poor, students with disabilities, and youth of color, especially African Americans, who are suspended, expelled, or arrested at school at the highest rates, despite comparable rates of infraction” (Heitzeg 1-2). Even if children do not get directly arrested at school, the increased amount of time away from school may lead students to getting involved with the streets and activity associated with it. The data is also comparable to that of the judicial system in the sense that minorities are targeted more often. Not only does them pipeline have a direct link to prison, the school system itself is set up in a way that is reminiscent of prison systems.

The racialized structures of America go far past the physical establishments of the country and can even be seen in its environmental struggles. Paul Kivel brings many of these systems to light in his work, but one that frequently goes unnoticed is the placement of polluting sources in North America. As he states, “Numerous studies have shown that heavily polluting industries in North America such as mining and manufacturing, garbage dumps, toxic waste sites, medical waste incinerators, and congested freeways are located disproportionately in communities of color” (Kivel 274). Joey brings this up in the lines, “The truth is under your nasal but even the air's all fucked up, how we supposed to see stars? Chemical trails above us, Plus bunch of other shit that's undiscovered” (Bada$$). Not only do poor people of color have to deal with all of the aforementioned injustices, but they also have to deal with pollutants that cause asthma and higher rates of diseases associated with them. All of these things provide to the structural racism of America, which can be defined as the underlying systems by which racism is maintained, expounded upon and aggregated. These systems are set up by individuals to create a collective that can survive far longer than any of the individuals that help create it while also being able to operate independent of them. These systems are also established with the help of ideologies. Stuart Hall says this of ideologies, “ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intention. They pre-date individuals, and form part of the determinate social formations and conditions in which individuals are born” (Hall 9). With so many things to fight against from birth, it starts to seem like they are impossible to overcome.

Regardless of all the hopeless pictures Joey paints, he counters them with images of rebellion and unity. Lines like, “They don't want us in abundance, They know it's strength in them numbers, That's why they gave you one,” “We 'bout to win, there's an L for the other side of him, Most greats that you lost, I invite 'em in, To my soul, don't you feel the vibes when I'm channelin’, The innermost of my spirit been engulfed with plenty gold” (Bada$$) all show that unity is a key to success. The country tries to create segregation between blacks and whites, but also within the black community itself. That is why Joey uses such strong language when he calls for unity and rebellion, citing that he is living the ideals of his predecessors and ancestors. Without it, the black community will remain split, so Joey is using his platform to try to unite the people and give them hope. He does this through of his imagery of rebellion as well. Lines like “To tell the truth, man, I'm fuckin' disgusted, I fear for the lives, for my sisters, my brothers, Less fortunate than I, let's formulate a plan, I'm sick of holdin' grudges, I'm loadin' in all my slugs and, Aimin' it at the judges, fuck the cops” (Bada$$). Images like this promote violence on the surface, but if someone examines it more closely, they will realize it is just fighting back against an oppressive system that has been taking advantage of black people and killing them for years, which can also be seen in the lyrics with references to Eric Garner. As Ashraf Rushdy says, “The past teaches us that images of terror - used responsibly - can foster a climate in which terror is no longer tolerated” (Rushdy 77). While Joey is not using pictures of the killing, the placement of the lyrics regarding Eric Garner, and the use of language, forms a poetic image that brings the listener back to the video of the injustice and invokes thought about the other unfortunate events that ended up with the tragic loss of black life. This type of killing is alluded to with other lyrics as well. Joey does a good job at using them to show contrast to the hope driven undertones and to lay the groundwork for why he is attacking the structurally racist ideologies that underly American society.

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