

And You Don't Stop

The assimilation of Hip Hop, hegemony, and the Empire State

Shellyne Rodriguez

New York City has just concluded its official celebrations of the 50th anniversary of Hip Hop. Events included a series of free block parties in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx: the Rock the Bells Concert in Forest Hills Stadium with acts including LL Cool J, Salt-N-Pepa, Ludacris, and Queen Latifah; the Mass Appeal & Live Nation Hip Hop 50 live concert at Yankee Stadium featuring Run-DMC, Lil Wayne, Snoop Dogg, Ice Cube, Eve, Lil' Kim, Trina, T.I., A\$AP Ferg, and The Sugarhill Gang. All presided over and ordained by New York's cop mayor, Eric Adams. This entire premise, at first glance, might appear absurd. Hip Hop, a cultural offensive which developed on the margins of the American neoliberal petri-dish came into being in contention with the state and its ruling class that were hell bent on destroying its creators; the Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian industrial migrants who made New York home.

Hip Hop was created in the midst of many plagues by a generation that had experienced decades of precarious working conditions, primarily in factories with no access to union jobs hoarded by the white working class. Deindustrialization left them facing a new level of poverty. By the mid 1970s, neoliberalism had thrown down the gauntlet of austerity, resulting in municipal disinvestment, and soon racist landlords were burning down whole neighborhoods to collect fire insurance money. This generation endured an opioid epidemic that began in the veins of returning Vietnam vets with massive trauma, followed by a crack epidemic, the consequence of a manufactured narcotics economy planted by the feds which ultimately set us up for the war on drugs and mass incarceration.

How then do we come to a point where 50 years later, we are witnessing that generation's assimilation and absorption into the state and their complicity with the power of its institutions? This is not new.

The past and present are filled with subjugated people becoming complicit in their own repression. No one is exempt. Not even those Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian kids who survived the atrocity of racist capitalist violence executed via the settler colonial logic of elimination and created Hip Hop in its wake.

What does upward mobility look like for the average Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian New Yorker? The images of lavish lifestyles that accost us all exist for the most part in the realm of fantasy. For poor and underemployed people, it's a kind of expensive cosplay; a profoundly cliché middle-class desire. A home with a backyard. A two-car garage. A vacation. Tuition money. It isn't the villas and penthouses of the ruling class that is desired. It's a miniature kingdom, in the realm of the plain. The white flight dream of Long Island and Westchester with plenty of clean air and open waterfronts once exemplified this middle-class landscape, where cops and firemen and white workers with good union jobs were able to live. For Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian migrants, the pathway to the middle class opened up after President Franklin D. Roosevelt banned discriminatory employment practices by federal agencies, unions, and companies engaged in war-related work. Suddenly Black and Latinx people could work for the government and in the public sector, encompassing a wide variety of bureaucratic positions, from the Department of Motor Vehicles, Social Services, and the Post Office, to corrections officers, in the courts and of course, in the police department where the current mayor got his start. The lane carved for some Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian industrial migrants to enter the middle class was a bureaucratic one, as middlemen, gatekeepers, and enforcers, administering mundane and often violent policies on behalf of the state. The bureaucratic authority and respectability granted to some of these workers functioned like a kind of hierarchy over their neighbors. For example, the welfare case manager could decide to withhold benefits from the daughter of a woman who works in the bodega on her block. What attitudes and interactions must they have when they encounter each other around the way? What does it feel like to submit paperwork at housing court over an eviction notice to a judgmental clerk, who lives in your building?

These antagonisms however, haven't been enough

to separate the Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian barely middle-class from their less employed counterparts. As Stuart Hall explains, breaking down Gramsci, "the diversification of social antagonisms is grounded in the relations and institutions of civil society," i.e. family, school, church, hood politics, and ethnic nationalism fuck us up. There are a dozen ways we remain connected over and above this particular line in the sand. Hence the correction officer who takes off his uniform and drinks a beer after work with the cousin of an inmate he violated at work earlier in the day. Capitalism is always poised to employ one half of us to humiliate, hunt, beat, arrest, and kill the other half, and colonization

what appears to be concessions or even make themselves in our likeness—because these gestures are always enacted to solidify power. And what is this cultural scaffold or, as Gramsci called it, "national-popular culture" made of? It's the Yankee baseball cap and the Brooklyn Nets, a dollar slice of pizza, the collective dissatisfaction with the MTA, and the collective grief around 9/11. It's the Cyclone in Coney Island, the Rockefeller Christmas tree, and the spectacle of Times Square. It's Frank Sinatra and Jay Z. It's green beer for Saint Patrick's Day, and Salsa music at Orchard Beach. It's a citywide celebration of the 50th anniversary of Hip Hop.

"And so, I need to say to you, Hip Hop, you must identify where you are right now. 50 years later, from block parties to carrying crates of records, to music in the park, to having to draw your own flyers, to doing the \$5 events... Look at 50 years later. The mayor of the most powerful city on the globe is a Hip Hop mayor... The mayor of Chicago, Hip Hop. The mayor of Atlanta, Hip Hop. The mayor of Los Angeles, Hip Hop. We finally have reached where we are. ...now the police commissioner, the first Puerto Rican police commissioner, it's a Hip Hop commissioner... And I want us to know that you are now in Gracie Mansion. That's how good God is. 50 years could have fallen when another mayor was here. God made the intersectionality of 50 years of Hip Hop to be at the time that Eric Adams, the Hip Hop mayor, is in office. That is the significance of the moment."

—Mayor Eric Adams on the 50th Anniversary of Hip Hop



BICOPs on the Third of May, 2022 by Shellyne Rodriguez. Colored pencil on paper 2022

makes every baton swing pregnant with the certitude of its own perceived righteousness. It creates the illusion of power and the illusion of a secure place in the bosom of the ruling class, or the state. Fanon describes this in urban colonial subjects in Martinique and Algeria, "The workers, primary schoolteachers, artisans, and small shopkeepers who have begun to profit—at a discount, to be sure—from the colonial setup" and El Hajj Malik Shabazz explains this in Harlem and in Detroit, where he delivered his metaphor on the house and field in the antebellum south. The dilemma is reflected in the numbers. Black and Latinx people make up 90 percent of jail admissions, but we comprise 52 percent of New York City's population. The bureaucratic administration and maintenance of the cages are also overwhelmingly Black and Latinx. Of the 17, 045 civilians employed by the NYPD, 46.4% are Black and 22.6% are Latinx. Uniformed Black cops make up 15.9% while Latinx double that number at 31.4%. We are the muscle of the state. We are the cattle and its fodder.

Now, after almost 100 years since Roosevelt's Executive Order banning discrimination, this barely middle-class Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian workforce has assimilated into the cultural fabric of settlers and Ellis Island whites. The Yiddish "Oy" is inverted and yelled as a "Yo" now on any given street corner. Here Gramsci serves up the logic once again. If we are the muscle of the state, then we also come together alongside those Italian, Irish, and Jewish New Yorkers to form the guts of civil society. Civil society is how we create "culture." When Gramsci says "civil society," he means "the public sphere where ideas and beliefs are shaped and the hegemony of the ruling class is reproduced through the media, universities and religious institutions to manufacture consent and legitimacy." Hegemony is the "scaffold" around the skyscraper baby, where the ruling class peers down with a bird's eye view, bobbing and weaving as needed to retain power. As Gramsci so eloquently spelled out in those prison notebooks, "the traditional ruling class is able to quickly recapture power when it is slipping from its grasp, by making sacrifices and exposing itself to an uncertain future with demagogic promises" adopting the morals, ethics, politics, culture, etc. of the broadest masses to keep the machine of the economic apparatus of production cranking. In other words, the ruling class can afford

It wasn't difficult this summer to run into billboards across the city with big drippy graffiti style letters announcing the multiple celebrations of the 50th anniversary of Hip Hop. An irony considering the city's ongoing hostile relationship with the art form. Still, while nearly every museum and institution got in on the festivities hosting numerous concerts, events, and exhibitions, the transit museum blatantly ignored these iconic happenings, rejecting the conservation and archiving of graffitied trains as its official policy. It's the closest to the truth. The cultural offensive that birthed Hip Hop was an enemy of the state, even if some of its soldiers defected. In his remarks on the 50th anniversary of Hip Hop, Adams labeling Black mayors "Hip Hop mayors," is as laughable as his use of the term intersectionality. Indeed, all of these mayors have been courting rappers and following the Adams blueprint, hosting citywide Hip hop festivities and bestowing honors on their favorite rappers while their homeless populations swell and they beef up their police departments. Cop City in Atlanta is a glaring example. But the love between rappers and the state goes both ways. Lil' Wayne has always been vocal about his love of police. Wayne serenaded Vice President Kamala Harris with his hit song "Mrs. Officer" at her Hip Hop anniversary bash. We also saw the Bronx bootlicker himself, Fat Joe, declare former President Bill Clinton and chief architect of the 1994 mass incarceration crime bill an honorary member of his crew, while gifting him a pair of Terror Squad x Nike Air Force Ones. Weirdos.

We can dismantle the bloated pageantry of Adams and his cohort and their rhetoric promoting hyper-individualism, and challenge the notion of the "pioneer,"—a violent colonial term—quite easily. This is not to say that Grand Wizard Theodore didn't scratch the first record. But viewed through a feminist lens grounded in community, we would say, that the scratch required his scolding mother to enter the room. We would notice that she provided a room for him, giving him the time and space to develop his craft. Kool Herc needed the people to lend their ears and bodies to the dance. The Hoe Avenue Peace Treaty needed to happen in order to ease gang tensions enough to allow things to flourish. Social reproduction. Secondly, on some occasions, it is necessary to confiscate the creation from its creator. The vessel from which the thing emerged is only a vessel. It's why we can still recite the lyrics to "Fuck

The Police” even if we’ve discarded Ice Cube who is busy moonlighting as a right-wing media commentator alongside the likes of Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson. Lastly, we would have to recognize the ineffectuality of nostalgia, which is often removed from context, steeped in selective memory of “the good ol’ days,” and a proven device of manipulation. It was nostalgia that put Trump in the White House and sent his army charging on January 6th. It is nostalgia keeping the mayor afloat. Adams, who grew up in Southside Jamaica Queens, and graduated from the New York City Police Academy in 1984, certainly bore witness to Hip Hop’s emergence even as he hunted down “perps” who were also b-boys and b-girls, graff writers and emcees in his role as a pig. This nostalgic embrace of Hip Hop by the state is further evidence of how Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian New Yorkers who oversaw the creation of Hip Hop have adopted every hallmark of what we recognize as a reactionary conservative right wing white middle class ideology teetering on fascism. Whether they vote Democrat or Republican is beside the point. Adams, who unsurprisingly enjoys far reaching endorsements and support from these government employees, himself was a registered Republican between 1997-2001, flip flopping back & forth as a political chess move. By now it is well understood that the essential role of the Democrats is to implement whatever draconian policy Republicans flagrantly impose by creating the bureaucracy around it. The labels left or right just confuse things. The character of the people is heavily Christian, pro-police, pro-real-estate development, anti-immigrant,

and anti-poor. And where might we witness this spirit? On the radio.

The radio receiving set develops the sensorial, intellectual, and muscular powers of man in a given society. The radio in occupied Algeria is a technique in the hands of the occupier.

—Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*

New York City has three Hip Hop and R&B radio stations, two of which are considered sister stations, owned by Mediaco Holding and operated by Emmis Communication, Hot 97 (97.1) and WBLS (107.5). Advertising on both radio stations is repetitive and essentially the same; seminars to learn how to flip real estate, injury lawyers, car salesman, or the fearmongering “make a deal with the IRS” or “consolidate your debt” commercials but the culture of the stations are decidedly different and the character and demographics of the stations are distinct. Hot 97 plays newer music, and caters to a younger crowd while WBLS plays throwbacks and is geared towards older folks. In fact, many of the deejays, like Buggy and Red Alert moved to WBLS as they aged out of Hot 97. In addition, WBLS has a talk radio character with a conservative Christian bent. Radio hosts like comedian Steve Harvey could be heard offering relationship advice and setting a moral tone. On Sunday mornings, one can tune into Open Line, a radio call-in show long viewed as an important forum for the black community. Created by its host Bob Slade in 1989, Open Line was a political voice,

taking sharp positions on issues such as the Central Park Five and Black Lives Matter. While Slade, who passed away in 2019, opened the airwaves for critical debate, the audience has continuously revealed over time a gradual psychological assimilation of the middle-class values of white-flight New Yorkers. What began as a space for Black voices to be heard, and to resonate across the city, has now become a hegemonic device reinforcing the power of the state. Quite literally as in the case of Norman Seabrook, the powerful and corrupt ex-union boss of the Corrections Officers Benevolent Association (COBA) who held court on WBLS on Sunday evenings from 7pm-9pm where he spoke on behalf of his constituents against the closing of Riker’s Island. COBA is a standing army of 20,000 active and retired members, 82% of which are Black and Latinx. Open Line continues to air on Sunday mornings from 8am-9am with replacement hosts. The show is followed by “Keeping it Real” hosted by talking head Rev. Al Sharpton. Every other Sunday, Sharpton is followed by a thirty-minute segment called, “Hear from the Mayor,” in which the Hip Hop mayor himself Eric Adams takes over the airwaves to talk to “the people.”

According to WBLS’s operations manager, about 60,000 people tune in to Open Line each week. As it stands, this time slot, which had been transformed into a community forum by the late Bob Slade, is one potential site for struggle. Currently, it functions as an echo chamber for those barely middle-class Black, Puerto Rican, and West Indian New Yorkers who came up adjacent to the emergence of Hip Hop. The

dilemma forces us to draw on Fanon once again, as he observed the Algerian relationship to the radio and its useful transformation in the anticolonial fight. For them, it was a wholesale rejection of the device as a way to reject the colonial French voice of Radio-Alger. It wasn’t until the establishment of The Voice of Fighting Algeria that the tides changed, becoming as Fanon said, “of capital importance in consolidating and unifying the people.” In such a context, “I Can’t Live Without My Radio” by LL Cool J, who has played a cop on a police soap opera since 2009, comes to mind. It’s almost as if the colonial sounds of Radio Alger have penetrated us deeply, bursting through our boom boxes, taking on our appearance and stride. How might we begin to form an equivalent to The Voice of Fighting Algeria to drown them out? Where else might their ideals be challenged and reshaped? What if there was a dedicated swarming of callers every Sunday clogging those lines, challenging this hegemonic fuckery by setting the tones of those discussions, presenting new ideas and common sense for the aunts and uncles that are anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and abolitionist? What if we rendered the cop mayor’s bull horn useless as a war maneuver? What is clear, and what 90’s rap duo Mobb Deep warned us about, is that “there’s a war going on outside nobody’s safe from.”

Shellyne Rodriguez is an artist, educator, writer, and community organizer based in the Bronx. Her practice utilizes text, drawing, painting, collage and sculpture to depict spaces and subjects engaged in strategies of survival against erasure and subjugation.

ARB DISPATCH

Conspiring with the Trees

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

In Atlanta, 61 activists were arraigned on September 5, 2023 on RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act) charges for their association with the Stop Cop City movement. Among The Atlanta 61, 42 are already facing domestic terrorism charges; three are leaders of the Atlanta Solidarity Fund; and three are being charged for merely distributing flyers after the murder of Manuel “Tortuguita” Terán in January 2023. RICO charges carry a sentence of 5-20 years in prison which would be added to sentences if convicted of their original charges.

In the face of these blatant attempts to intimidate and silence activists with threats of decades-long prison terms, 12 of the Atlanta 61 have released a statement forcefully calling out the government, “This RICO indictment is an attempt by the state to not only criminalize dissent, but [to criminalize] a specific set of ideas which leads to dissent and offers an alternative framework to the state and capitalism. Anarchism, solidarity, mutual aid, and collectivism are specifically named in the indictment [in order] to make people afraid of these ideas, when the only people who are actually afraid of these collective ways of organizing are the politicians, cops, and corporations who seek to preserve their absolute power over humanity.”

While city and state officials make legal threats and refuse to verify the 116,000 signatures of Atlanta residents—nearly a quarter of the city’s population—calling for a ballot referendum on Cop City’s construction, the Weelaunee Forest has been clear-cut and fenced in with razor wire. Activists’ attempts in November to peacefully march to the construction site were immediately deemed illegal and met with police violence and tear gas.

“The state,” the Atlanta 61 statement read, “wants us to be terrified and paralyzed into allowing the continuation of its sordid legacy through the land grab, the plantation, and the prison farm which haunts the Weelaunee forest and all the state’s territories to this day.”



Weelaunee Forest, outside Atlanta, GA. November 14, 2023. Photo by Dustin Chambers

“The Georgia RICO statute is so expansive it defines free social relations as ‘an enterprise,’ including ‘any unchartered union, association, or group of individuals associated in fact although not a legal entity.’ By this logic, a group of friends can be a criminal enterprise—or a group of strangers. Under this statute, it would be unlawful to participate, directly or indirectly, in any form of activism.”

“If the state succeeds in prosecuting this case,” the statement read, “it will do lasting harm to all of us. Just as the RICO law was ostensibly written to take down the mafia and has expanded to taking down anarchists, it will expand to take down any social movement which demands substantive change from the

state. The law does not need to find you guilty of any crime, only of ‘conspiring’ with people who are; with ‘conspiring’ now meaning as little as sharing beliefs or goals. If you believe the state is doing something wrong or have a goal of making it stop doing that thing, you could be guilty of conspiracy, even if you never met anyone who committed a crime in furtherance of that belief or goal.”

Pressure is mounting, with a concrete contractor no longer working on the project after call-in campaigns, a work stoppage during the November demonstration, and “decommissioned” equipment. Cop City’s main contractor, Brasfield and Gorrie, has indicated they will also pull out of the project if setbacks and damage to equipment continue.

While the fight to block Cop City continues to grow and shift, The Atlanta 61 are refusing to remain silent while awaiting their fate and are instead offering a way forward: “Mutual aid and solidarity are intrinsic to how our Earth and its inhabitants survive—in spite of systems of permanent suffocation, we all breathe the same air—a conspiracy with the trees. Loving one another is how we live and fight in tandem. We don’t need a centralized ‘organization,’ ‘entity,’ or ‘enterprise’ for our fight, because it belongs to all of us. We are all forest defenders.”



www.anarchistreviewofbooks.org