

GHETTO MUSIC

by Rich "Frosted" Shusterman

I have found that all music has originated from the ghetto and this is why I call the album Ghetto Music: The Blueprint of Hip Hop. Only Ghetto consciousness will understand it and only ghetto consciousness will enjoy it.

— KRS-One

If you ain't never been to the Ghetto, don't ever come to the Ghetto. Cause you won't understand the Ghetto. So stay the fuck out of the Ghetto.

— Naughty by Nature
from "Ghetto Bastard
(Everything's Gonna Be Alright)"



Rap music is black music. No one can deny this. Nor can anyone really question that rap is ghetto music. Born in the mid-seventies in the black ghettos of New York, rap has not let its astounding world-wide success interfere with its continuing cultural and political commitment to the ghetto. When rap's market success threatens to make it too commercial, when international artistic fame threatens to bury its hardcore political message under a glitzy sophistication of media technology, when an increasingly large part of rap's audience (and some of its artists) live outside the 'hood, true hip hop artists, like KRS-One and Naughty by Nature, proudly remind us that rap is ghetto music. So it is!

But what does this mean in concrete cultural and practical terms? What does being ghetto music mean in terms of the important political, social, and artistic issues which rap faces: controversies concerning racial

and ethnic purism, and the validity of the gangster image and the pimpin' style. These problematic issues will have to be resolved collectively by the hip-hop community through dialogue, debate, and action — on and off vinyl. No individual can provide the answers, and I certainly would not pretend to, especially since, as a white philosopher and fan of rap I am only a very marginal member of the hip-hop community. I want, however, to take this opportunity to lay down some knowledge about the concept of ghetto and to offer some thoughts about what that concept's history means for rap as ghetto music with respect to the issues of isolationist black purism and exclusionary ghetto pride.

The term "ghetto" was first used in 1516 to designate the special neighborhood in Venice where the Jews were forcibly segregated by the Venetian community and obliged, by strict law, to live. This practice of officially confining the Jews to a special quarter became the common practice throughout the cities of Christian Europe which had a sizeable Jewish population, and the term ghetto became a general term for such a quarter. Jews were tolerated in the cities for economic reasons, because of their experience and skill in international trade, which they acquired because of their long exile from their homeland and the continued wandering that was forced upon them by persecution and expulsion from many lands. But, commerce apart, the Jews were scorned as racially and ethnically inferior to the ruling Christian community and were despised for being infidels blind to the Christian faith and stubbornly proud of their own. Isolating them in the ghetto was a way of exploiting them economically while preventing them from mixing with and contaminating the pure and superior Christian society.

The etymological source of ghetto is intriguing. Though some think it simply comes from the Italian word *borghetto* which means quarter or neighborhood, the latest *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989, Vol. 6) suggests that the Venetians called their Jewish quarter the ghetto because it had originally been the site of a foundry which in the Italian of that time was called a *getto*. But rather than a foundry "melting pot" where differences between Jews and Christians could be synthesized to create a stronger new social material, the ghetto became a symbol of the isolation, fear, and persecution of a racial minority and its cultural difference.

For centuries the word ghetto was strictly synonymous with the persecuting confinement of Jews, and it is only in the twentieth century that its use has been extended to designate the segregated urban dwelling of disadvantaged blacks and other racial or ethnic

minorities. In contrast to the original ghetto, today's ghettos do not impose their segregation by explicit law but by more complex forms of socio-economic oppression, which themselves are supported by the official laws and agencies of our society. But the motives of fear and exploitation, and the results of overcrowding and oppression, are the same.

If the ghetto has long been a shameful symbol of coerced confinement and presumed inferiority imposed by an oppressor; if it is today still the scene of such misery and crime, why should rap so proudly celebrate its being "ghetto music." Why not use rap's success, what Ice-T calls "its penetration to the heart of the nation" to break out of the ghetto mentality and insure that the hip-hop community will never again be ghettoized but will constitute a global and multiracial great community?

The answer involves a fascinating dialectic of the pride of shamed and oppressed minorities, where such a minority, in order to assert its ethnic self-respect against its shameful treatment by the oppressor, ends up taking pride in the very things which the oppressor regards and imposes as shameful. (We can see this dialectic at work in such black linguistic inversions as "bad" meaning "good" or the affectionate use of the term "nigger" which in white discourse was a term of shame.) Related to this dialectic of pride and shame is a dialectic of reciprocal exclusion in which the excluded oppressed minority reasserts itself by taking pride in its exclusion and the ethnic purity such exclusion guarantees, and where it reciprocally excludes the dominant majority as somehow inferior, dangerous, and unworthy of inclusion, just as the majority reciprocally excluded it for similar reasons.

Pride in the ghetto is an empowering reaction to the shame of the ghetto and the scornful, oppressive segregation by white society. In that sense it is an extremely positive reaction of black pride and should be encouraged. But the danger of such reactive ghetto pride is that it can turn into a policy of exclusionary chauvinistic isolation where topics and audiences that do not belong to the ghetto are denied genuine admission to hip hop culture. The above cited words of "the teacher" KRS-One about the necessity of ghetto consciousness for rap and the warning of Naughty by Nature for outsiders to "stay the fuck out of the ghetto" could be misinterpreted as simply advocating such an exclusionist attitude. I believe their thought is not so simplistic; for example, it is "ghetto consciousness" not actual ghetto living that KRS-One demands of the rap audience, and such consciousness may perhaps be obtainable or imaginable through sympathetic understanding of rap's message and one's own non-ghetto experience of humiliation, alienation, and oppression. For such woes, alas, are experienced also outside the ghetto; and their pervasiveness helps explain the global success of rap.

In any case, exclusionist ghetto chauvinism runs the risk of reinforcing the walls of hate and distrust which created the oppressive ghetto segregation in the first place. Unless ghetto pride is preached with recognition and tolerance of what lies outside the ghetto and with a willingness to share rap's ghetto message with all peoples of the world, rap's ghetto pride may simply build up the isolating ghetto walls from the inside in reaction to the hateful walls already imposed by racist white society from the outside; while what we want is that "the walls come tumbling down."

But since white society has not shown similar tolerance and recognition of rap, why blame hip hop for mixing ghetto pride with exclusionary ghetto chauvinism? No blame is being cast, and such chauvinism and separatism may be necessary steps in the journey to full social and cultural liberation. The point is to question whether chauvinist ghetto isolation or greater interracial tolerance and global respect for black culture is the ultimate aim of hip hop. And one way of seeing the problems of chauvinistic ghetto isolation without getting embroiled in the passionate controversies of current black cultural politics is by considering the painful history of the original ghetto dwellers — the Jews, who dramatically exhibit the dialectic of the shame and pride of minority oppression and its related dialectic of isolationist exclusion.

The Jews experienced the shame of many generations of slavery in Egypt and subsequently many centuries of forced exile and persecution. Their reaction was to stick ever more firmly to their proud faith that they were God's Chosen People, a select and elite, even if oppressed, minority among the many peoples of the world. Indeed, they even proudly explained their shameful persecution as the consequence of their divine selection and intrinsic superiority. Other nations persecuted the Jews because of anger at their proud ethnic difference and jealousy of their alleged special relationship to God; while God allowed the Jews to be persecuted by these other nations (Egyptian, Assyrian, Hellenistic, Roman, Christian) because he was testing and punishing them so that they could be purer bearers of the faith.

If Christian society ghettoized and excluded the Jews, Jewish ideology dialectically preached an exclusionary superiority vis-à-vis the Christians, vigorously opposing Christian efforts to convert them as well as combatting other forces of assimilation like intermarriage, so as to maintain ethnic and religious purity. The more Jews were persecuted as racially or ethnically different, the more they insisted with pride on this difference and the less willing they were to share their faith with other peoples of the world. Locked into exclusionist isolation, Jews did not seek to convert other peoples as did the

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Christians or Muslims. Indeed, had the Jewish nation not been so wrapped up in their proud but persecuted isolation as God's special Chosen People, had they been more willing to share their "Chosenness" with other peoples by embracing them in their faith, Jesus's teachings and the ideal of universal conversion and salvation would have been absorbed in the Jewish religion. Christianity would then have remained a denomination of Judaism, and given the conversion of the Roman Empire and Germanic Tribes, the Jewish people would have been a dominant presence in Europe rather than an oppressed minority, feared and despised for their proud insistence on ethnic difference and their haughty will for exclusion. The long history of pride in oppressed exclusion and suffering made the Jews ideal targets for the horrors of Nazi genocide. There is a logical connection between the imposed isolation of the ghetto and the concentration camp.

Modern Israel has well learned the lesson that there should be no great pride in suffering persecution, but she has been less successful in realizing that her implicit superiority complex vis-à-vis other nations (i.e., its Arab neighbors) is a continuing obstacle to her peace, security, and prosperity. European and American Jews have learned the ghetto lesson and thus fight, often fanatically, against their ghettoization, vigilantly attacking as antisemitic any expression which singles out the Jews for criticism. Hence the witchhunts about antisemitism in rap. Though maintaining their ethnic identity and pride, American Jews have increasingly tried to integrate themselves more fully into American culture. Both they and American culture have generally profited from this, though their successful integration has made American Jews more conservative than they were in the 50's and 60's when they struggled for civil rights side by side with blacks. American culture (most notably its music, dance, and sport) has profited even more from Afro-American expression, but the Afro American people remains sadly ghettoized and socio-economically oppressed.

Is there a moral here for rap? Since there are obvious differences between Jewish and black ghettoization, it would be risky to draw any clear conclusion. But I think it would be best for rap to combine its pride as ghetto music with a positive openness to the social world that lies outside the

ghetto yet perform influences it. Rap needs to continue Public Enemy's commitment to reach out and "teach the bourgeois," to spread rap's powerful and much-needed message of bodily, social, and political liberation far beyond its original ghetto community. It needs to do this as much for the ultimate good of that ghetto community as for the good of the world that envelops and impacts on that community.

In celebrating itself as ghetto music, rap needs to remember what so many of its songs remind us: the horror and misery of ghetto life. We should never forget that rap's roots, inspiration, and political commitment rest firmly in the actualities of the ghetto; but this does not mean that the actual ghetto represents rap's ideal. Progressive rap, as I see it, should aim to transform the ghetto and the wider world, not simply idealize the former and exclude the latter.

RICHARD (RICH FROSTED) SHUSTERMAN is professor of philosophy at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and author of *PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS* (1992), which provides a philosophical study of rap. Dr. Shusterman, a Philadelphia native, was educated in Israel (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) and received his doctorate at Oxford University. He is also the author of T.S. ELIOT AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF CRITICISM and THE OBJECT OF LITERARY CRITICISM.

