

# Censorship of rap, marginalisation of African Americans, and Musicking

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## **1. Introduction**

I shall deal with two questions in this research paper. The first question concerns whether the censorship of rap music is a political tool used to marginalise African American communities in the United States of America. The second question concerns whether the concept of musicking can help understand music censorship's marginalising effect in a more comprehensive way.

These questions allow us to highlight the marginalising effect of censorship due to the undermining or devaluing of the messages and stories told through rap music. Making this visible makes it harder for censor boards to censor without giving sufficient justification and, therefore, puts pressure on governments to justify their doing.

From an academic standpoint, these questions help legitimise multimodal analytical approaches to the intersection of politics and music by broadening our understanding of music to include viewing music as a verb, as the theory of musicking suggests.

I shall answer these questions by first looking at some foundational literature in the theory section. These pieces of literature include the history of music censorship and music censorship in the U.S., the concept of othering and personal identity, and the musicology concept of musicking (section 2). I shall then explain how the censorship of rap contributes to the marginalisation of African American communities in the USA by looking at the censorship of rap, parental advisory labels, and the music of N.W.A and Ice-T (section 3). Lastly, I shall explain how the concept of musicking can elicit a more comprehensive understanding of music censorship's marginalising effect by describing musicking in the context of rap and describing the effect of music censorship with the broader definition of music (section 4).

## **2. Theory:**

### **2.1. Censorship**

Marie Korpe, Ole Reitov and Martin Cloonan describe the history of music censorship in their chapter entitled "Music Censorship from Plato to the Present" in "Music and Manipulation" by Steven Brown and Ulrik Volgsten. This piece of literature is integral for my research questions as it provides a historical account of music censorship's use as a tool to homogenize culture according to the hegemonic norm of society. The authors argue that censorship is a form of cultural protection intended for mass behavioural control along the political ideologies underlying divergent governmental practices like nationalism, racism, sexism etc., (Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan 2005, 240). Governments often regulate mass behaviour by controlling symbolic elements of a minority culture so that members of this community are unaware of their compliance with the hegemonic norms of society (Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan 2005, 240). With the objective of music censorship explained, the authors argue that music censorship ever since the era of Plato has been about more than just the musical elements (rhythm, intervals, lyrics etc.). Instead, music censorship includes censoring the activities associated with different kinds of music indigenous to minority cultures (Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan 2005, 241).

Claude Chastagner piece entitled "The Parents' Music Resource Center: From Information to Censorship" is an integral piece of literature for my research questions because it describes the PMRC's indirect censorship under the guise of providing information. The PMRC is an organisation started by members of the elite political class in the U.S. to inform the public about inappropriate music. The PMRC would use existing legislation to attack musicians seen as creating inappropriate music. This political pressure then urged record companies to coerce their artists to tone down or censor their work (Chastagner 1999, 186). The PMRC also successfully gained the right to issue parental advisory labels to music considered inappropriate for the youth of America (Chastagner 1999, 185). The centre was able to divert the public's attention away from the real issues that musicians were addressing in their songs by creating controversy with the issuing of the labels (Chastagner 1999, 190). Lastly, it is evidence of the previously mentioned governmental attempts to homogenise society under hegemonic norms. The founding board of directors of the PMRC comprised the wives of Senators, Congressmen and, Cabinet officials, claiming to contribute to the public welfare by

providing information on what forms of music were appropriate for the children of America (Chastagner 1999, 181). Therefore, the PMRC's membership, juxtaposed with its continuous targeting of rock and rap music (Chastagner 1999, 189), is the perfect example of the political elite attempting to homogenise the culture according to their norms.

In summary, music censorship is a political tool used to homogenise culture according to the hegemonic norm of society. Governments attempt to achieve homogeneity by censoring the music and activities associated with the music of minority cultures. Although the PMRC's political power has faded, it is nevertheless a perfect example of the intentionality of music censorship described by Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan, in the American context. Therefore, when I mention censorship in this paper, it comes with the insinuation of the above-described purpose and intentionality.

## **2.2. Othering**

"Othering, an Analysis", written by Lajos Brons, is an integral piece of literature for my research questions because it describes the sociological phenomena of othering and describes different forms of othering. Brons builds from Mike Crang's "Cultural geography", which describes othering as a process through which identities form in an unequal relationship (Crang 1998). Othering is the simultaneous construction of the self and the other in mutual and unequal opposition (Brons 2015, 70). One reason for this unequal construction of identity is the superior group possessing some desirable characteristics, while the inferior group (the other) lacks said characteristics. Brons calls othering based on whether a group or person has a desirable characteristic "crude othering" (Brons 2015, 80). The other reason for the unequal construction of identity is the superior group setting the standard of desirability. This form of othering is called sophisticated othering (Brons 2015, 81). Both crude and sophisticated othering contribute to the marginalization of minorities in society.

Another important piece of literature for my research questions is "Othering, identity formation and agency", written by Sune Qvotrup Jensen. Jensen highlights instances of othering in the media and documents how members of ethnic minorities respond to their social relegation. Jensen argues that capitalization on being positioned as the other is one of the reactions to othering (Jensen 2011, 63). Specifically, they received reactions from young black males and found that the position of the other can become "imbued with value if versioned through a hip hop iconography of black masculinity" (Jensen 2011, 68). The fact that hip hop

can add value to the position of the other may seem positive but, the other remains socially separated. This fact helps understand how the popularity of hip hop may increase and yet have a limited effect on the otherness of minority groups.

### **2.3. Musicking**

"Musicking" by Christopher Small is the seminal piece of literature for my second research question. Small argues that music is not a thing but is instead an activity. He challenges the notions that the performance of music plays no part in the creative process, that musical performance is communication in only one way and, that music has no crossover with the social realm. He argues a musical performance is a more artistically poignant experience than focusing on the musical work and its effect on a single listener (Small 1998). Overall, musicking broadens the scope of our perception of music artistically and socially.

### **2.4. Hypotheses**

From the above theoretical foundation, I can formulate two hypotheses.

The first hypothesis builds off of censorship and othering theory.

Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan's argument that censorship is a political tool used to homogenise culture according to the hegemonic norm of society; which shows the intentionality of music censorship, along with the contextualising of music censorship in the U.S. provided by Chastagner, allow me to arrive at my first hypotheses.

Furthermore, othering helps gain a more nuanced understanding of the actual process through which minority groups identify themselves at the margins of society. Othering also supports the underlying principle of music censorship, which is elites in society setting standards of desirability to discourage activities of the ethnic minority.

Therefore, the first hypothesis is; **H1: Censorship of rap music is a political tool used to marginalise African American communities in the United States of America.**

The second hypothesis builds off of the theory of musicking.

Small's argument that music is an activity and not a thing and that music performance is more artistically poignant than the actual work of music suggests broadening the scope of our perception of music artistically and socially. By adopting musicking and broadening the

scope of our perception of music artistically and socially, we are also broadening the scope of music censorship. Broadening the scope of music censorship is also concurrent with previously mentioned arguments about how music censorship encompasses the activities associated with supposedly inappropriate music.

Therefore, the second hypothesis is; **H2: The concept of musicking helps more comprehensively understand music censorship's marginalising effect by broadening the scope of what is being censored.**

### **3. Censorship of rap contributes to the marginalization of African American communities in the USA**

#### **3.1. The censorship of rap in the USA: Parental Advisory Labels**

One can find evidence of censorship in virtually any art form, but it appears especially prevalent in popular music. Censorship of popular music has a longstanding history in the USA. There are specific examples in different decades of attempts to homogenize culture according to the hegemonic norm of society. Jazz faced vehement rejection from the preceding era of classical music fans and, Rock n roll faced the same vehement rejection from the preceding folk music fans (Jones 1991, 75,76). It is hard to ignore the common denominator of black artists and music being subject to numerous attempts of coercion to conform to hegemonic standards in society (Jones 1991, 76). However, the advent of direct government intervention into the sphere of popular music came in the form of the Parents Music Resource Center (Jones 1991, 77). The PMRC, who had considerable influence in Washington, successfully gained the right to issue parental advisory labels to music that they found inappropriate for the youth of America (Chastagner 1999).

Though the PMRC's original intent may have been to inform and protect, the Senate hearings and the subsequent album labelling evolved into what some would consider explicit censorship. At the very least, although the PMRC never advocated for explicit censorship, the Parental Advisory label now connotes obscenity and inappropriate behaviour in the minds of many in the American populous (Anderson 2020, 39).

Furthermore, although there is a notional argument that suggests parental advisory labels encourage youths to consume the supposedly inappropriate music in an act of defiance, adolescents actually dislike labelled music. This dislike, however, is quite limited and may be attributed to the fact that adolescent listeners do not focus on lyrics but instead focus on the rhythm and other implicit musical elements (Christenson 1992). Nevertheless, labelling still has a negative effect on the way listeners perceive music's appropriateness.

Overall, parental advisory labels are a continuation of a long history of music censorship in the USA. They, like the more subliminal rejections of genres in the past, frame music negatively and contribute to the attempted homogenizing of culture according to the hegemonic norms of society.

### **3.2. Case study: N.W.A and Ice T**

"Fuck tha police" is one of rap's most controversial and infamous songs. The lyrics are testimonies from each rapper describing incidents where a police officer has wronged them. The song highlighted police brutality against black youth and informed people of the predetermined hardships created by racism toward the African American community. "Fuck tha police" remains socially poignant and is, therefore, a great example of art that reflects reality (Green 2018). Nevertheless, the N.W.A faced tremendous pressure not to perform the song and, the album received the parental advisory label.

Another controversial song from the era of gangster rap is "Cop killer" by Ice T. "Cop killer" is a song in which Ice T, through admittedly jarring and violent lyrics, describes life as a black man in relation to the police. Several lyrics in the song explain that Ice T is acting in self-defence but, the media at the time ignored this and instead framed the song as unnecessarily violent, obscene, and highly inappropriate (Sieving 1998). The supposed violence in the lyrics is an example of sociocultural conventions embedded and understood amongst a particular ethnic/racial group (Fiske 1996). The lack of effort shown to understand the lyrics whilst considering the social context that the artist represents means that the majority in society attempts to subdue the art of the minority.

From these two case studies, it is clear that rap music conveys important messages about the artists' situation in society. Rap provides an outlet for the alienated black youth to voice their frustrations. The method and language in which artists choose to voice these

frustrations may be seen as vulgar, profane, misogynistic etc., but they are nevertheless a reflection of the artists' lived experience and must not be discounted (Lusane 1993). Dismissing or ignoring the messages of artists who represent ethnic/racial minorities will result in marginalization. I shall elaborate on this point in the next section.

### **3.3. Marginalizing effect of the censorship of rap**

The elite and general public view rap music as lacking respectability. As mentioned before, despite the merits of the societal importance of the genre, rap music experiences moral and aesthetic condemnation through organized censorship, arrests, and the police-enforced stopping of concerts. Furthermore, such forms of condemnation dilute and undermine rap's ethnic and political content (Shusterman 1991). The parental advisory label and all other forms of censorship have the guise of social benefit, but in reality, it labels African American lived experiences as detrimental to society.

Censorship is the process of governments attempting to homogenize the culture in society to fit the hegemonic norms (Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan 2005). Inherent in this process is the elite class coercing ethnic/racial minorities and setting the standards of morality and appropriateness. The elite class setting the standard of morality and appropriateness and then simultaneously ostracizing ethnic/racial minority groups is a form of sophisticated othering (Brons 2015).

Sophisticated othering involves the creation of mutual and unequal identities between the majority group (in-group) and the minority group (out-group) (Brons 2015). In this case, the standards set by the in-group, which causes inequity, pertains to music and associated cultural norms. Therefore, the censorship of rap, which sets standards for morality and appropriateness, contributes to othering and, consequently, the marginalization of African American communities in the United States of America.



## **4. Musicking can elicit a more comprehensive understanding of music censorship's marginalizing effect**

### **4.1. Musicking and rap**

As mentioned before, musicking argues that music is not a thing but is instead an activity. Musical performance is a more artistically poignant experience than focusing on the musical work and its effect on a single listener (Small 1998). Therefore, musicking would suggest focusing on the performance of rap and what it means to participate in rap.

Rap urges a passionate and visceral participatory involvement from its fans unlike, the aesthetic of distanced, disengaged, formalist judgment expected by fans of supposedly more appropriate music. Rappers want to be appreciated through energetic involvement and dance, not through immobile contemplation and dispassionate study. An example of this is fans moving their hands up and down with the beat (Shusterman 1991).

This desired aesthetic of energetic involvement is similar to Plato's account of poetry and its appreciation as a chain of divine madness extending from the Muse through the artists and performers to the audience. Specific to the case of rap, the passionate movement is reminiscent of African religion (Shusterman 1991).

The broadening of our understanding of what music is, as suggested by musicking, also allows us to view the benefits of rap in music education due to its storytelling ability. However, despite the benefits of rap in music education, there is a notion that rap is inappropriate for education (Stanton 2018). This notion is due to the same unequal power structures that rap tries to address and is compounded by the censorship of rap.

### **4.2. The effect of music censorship with new understanding of music**

The theory of musicking expands our understanding of what it means to be involved with rap. The energetic movement and engagement expected from fans is embedded in African American culture and is reminiscent of the community's traditional African roots (Shusterman 1991). Furthermore, music education shows the benefits of rapping in storytelling and articulation of one's status (Stanton 2018).

Therefore, when looking at the censorship of rap with its broader meaning, we see that censorship affects the perception of the activities of rap fans and discounts its storytelling benefits. This assertion supports the argument of censorship being a tool used to discourage activities that diverge from the hegemonic norms of society (Korpe, Reitov and Cloonan 2005). The concept of musicking helps more comprehensively understand music censorship's marginalising effect by broadening the scope of what is being censored.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have addressed two research questions. The first question concerned whether the censorship of rap music is a political tool used to marginalise African American communities in the United States of America. The second question concerned whether the concept of musicking can help understand music censorship's marginalising effect in a more comprehensive way. I addressed these questions using the theoretical foundation of censorship, othering, and musicking. The theories of censorship and othering support my first hypothesis; H1: Censorship of rap music is a political tool used to marginalise African American communities in the United States of America. Censorship is defined as a tool used by the government to homogenise culture according to the hegemonic norms of society, while the sociological phenomena of othering explain how censorship sets the standards of appropriateness and, therefore, marginalises ethnic minorities by labelling their culture as inappropriate. The theory of musicking helps us more comprehensively understand the marginalising effect of music censorship by broadening our understanding of music itself. Consequently, my second hypothesis is also supported; H2: The concept of musicking helps more comprehensively understand music censorship's marginalising effect by broadening the scope of what is being censored.

My research in this paper is a stepping stone to a more comprehensive study that can successfully pressure governments to justify censorship and analyse the performance of music as well as the work itself in academia.

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