

'The Sagacity of Words': Gandhi and 21st Century Hip Hop

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Peer review: This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process



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Abstract

Best known for his ideas of ahimsa and satyagraha, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a prominent figure in the Indian freedom movement. Even today, he is highly revered for his philosophy of non-violence which was also an integral part of India's freedom struggle. Gandhi was responsible for making non-violent protests an important part of the movement. Now famous as a global expressive culture including forms of dance and music, Hip Hop, too, was conceived as a reaction to the violence that pervaded the gang culture of the late-1960s to early-1970s in The Bronx, New York City. Drawing from this thread of similarity, this article fleshes out parallels between the ideas of Gandhi and Hip Hop culture. Divided into three sections, it begins by establishing the cultural linkages between Gandhi, the Gandhian foundations of Hip Hop, and marking out the rationale of the study. The following section goes on to discuss the intertwining strings between Gandhi's perceptions of knowledge and the significance of knowledge in Hip Hop culture. Finally, the third section discusses references to and representations of Gandhi in selected works of 21st century Hip Hop. In doing so, the article posits that Gandhism and Hip Hop culture belong to a similar lineage of ideas, if not the same one.

Keywords: Gandhi; Hip Hop; knowledge; non-violence; protest.

Setting the Scene: Cultural Linkages between Gandhi and Hip Hop

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), or Mahatma Gandhi, as he is fondly known, is a globally renowned historical figure who played a crucial role in the Indian freedom movement. He is best known, worldwide, for his ideas of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. While *ahimsa* could quite literally be translated to non-violence, Gandhi himself explained *satyagraha* as ‘Truth (Satya) implies love, and firmness (*agraha*) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement “*Satyagraha*,” that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence’ (1928: 72). One could argue that that the ideas he propagated still stand relevant in this day and age, more than a hundred and fifty years after his birth.

Hip Hop is believed to have begun as a movement somewhere around the late 1960s and the early 1970s in The Bronx, New York City, and over the years it has grown immensely as a culture to the extent that today ‘[e]very populated continent (and most countries) have thousands of local hip-hop scenes shaped by artistic and cultural practices that are produced, defined, and sustained primarily by youth in their own neighbourhoods and communities’ (Morgan & Bennett, 2011: 180). It is a well-known fact that in its foundational years, as well as today, Hip Hop has functioned as a medium of protest through the means of art. It is believed that ‘Gandhi was the first in human history to extend the principle of nonviolence from the individual to social and political plane’ (Radhakrishnan, 2013: 7). While this is not to claim the presence of any sort of direct inspiration, it is undeniable that non-violent protest forms an indispensable element in our understanding of both, Gandhi as well as Hip Hop culture.

The Universal Zulu Nation has always maintained that Hip Hop was created with the aim to promote ‘peace, unity, love, happiness and fun’ (Afrika Bambaataa – Universal Zulu Nation, n.d.). That being said, Gandhi’s thoughts on peace, unity and love require little introduction:

I regard myself as a soldier, though a soldier of peace. (Gandhi as cited in Chappell, 2013: 326)

I believe in the essential unity of man and for that matter of all that lives. (Gandhi, 1924: 421)

To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. (Gandhi, 2001: 269)

While this is not, in any way, to imply that Hip Hop culture is directly influenced by the ideas of Gandhi, the similarities between the thinking of Gandhi and some of the most influential driving forces in Hip Hop are clearly there to be seen. This makes it pretty evident that the two ideologies share close cultural linkages. With this in mind, this article attempts to flesh out a few parallels between the ideas of Gandhi, and Hip Hop as a culture.

This article is driven by the underlying belief that the ideas of Gandhi, even 150 years after his birth, are still relevant in this day and age. In choosing Hip Hop as a point of conjuncture, the attempt is to point out how these ideas and values are still intrinsically linked to a culture that is widely associated with the youth. It is also worth pointing out here that in selecting examples for discussion the most obvious ones with extremely explicit parallels and references were chosen. For instance, this article does not delve into exclusive discussions about the role and significance of Gandhi's ideas in the fields of education or social activism at large. Those are, in fact, questions that merit being addressed separately in and of themselves. Neither does it, for example, analyze relatively minor or self-explanatory references to Gandhi in the lyrics of Hip Hop music such as 'Slim be the combination of an actual Kamikaze and Gandhi' (2018) in Eminem's 'Venom' (2018), or the numerous times Indian rappers use Gandhi as a reference to money such as in Veer Karan's 'Gandhi Ji' (2014) and Divine's 'Gandhi Money' (2019): simply because there is an overabundance of such references.

Gandhi, Knowledge, and The Fifth Element

While it might seem like a far stretch to posit that there are any considerable parallels between the ideas of Gandhi and Hip Hop as a culture, a panel discussion on 'The Influence of Gandhi and King on Hip Hop Culture', held on 13 January 2015 at The Menil Collection Museum in Houston, Texas, proves otherwise. During the discussion, a panel consisting of Anthony Pinn (Professor of Religion at Rice University), Monica Miller (Assistant Professor of Religion and Africana Studies at Lehigh University), Josef Helfenstein (Director of the Menil Collection), Bernard 'Bun B' Freeman (American Rapper), and Talib Kweli Greene (American Rapper and Activist) spoke at length about the connections between the ideas of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, and Hip Hop culture. This panel discussion provides a few noteworthy observations on how Gandhi and his ideas have had a deeply significant influence on Hip Hop. For the sake of this article, the first relevant one of these is Talib Kweli Greene's proposition that the messages of social disobedience, peace, and unity which both Afrika Bambaataa's Universal Zulu Nation, as well as Hip Hop as a global culture try to spread around the world, come directly from

Gandhi (Pinn, et al., 2015). The second is Monica Miller's comparison between remix and sampling within Hip Hop culture, and how human ideas are formed by 'sampling' other ideas. In this way she claims that Gandhi sampled Thoreau, and King sampled Gandhi before a large number of Hip Hop artists who address issues of race finally sample King. Miller, thus, establishes a lineage between the ideas of Gandhi and Hip Hop (*Ibid*). The third and most noteworthy idea, in the context of this article, came through Anthony Pinn's conclusion that 'what we can gather from Gandhi, and from King, and from Hip Hop culture, is awareness, lucidity, a greater understanding and perspective on what confronts us' (*Ibid*). These discussions add further credence to the argument that the ideas of Gandhi have definitely had an impact on Hip Hop culture down the years, at least indirectly if not directly.

As a form of artistic and cultural expression, Hip Hop is largely said to consist of four core elements: MCing or rapping which forms the oral element; DJing or spinning which forms the aural element; break-dancing or b-boying/b-girling which forms the physical element; and graffiti or graf writing which forms the visual element. Travis L. Gosa, in discussing Afrika Bambaataa's conception for the fifth element of Hip Hop, points out that "knowledge of self" refers to the Afro-diasporic mix of spiritual and political consciousness designed to empower members of oppressed groups'. He further points out that knowledge of self 'can be derived from the critical and self-reflective study of anything in the universe, as long as knowledge is deployed toward peace, unity, love, and having fun' (Gosa, 2015: 69, 75). Within Hip Hop culture thus, there is the belief that the fifth element, i.e. knowledge, ties the other four artistic elements together. Knowledge occupies an extremely crucial role within Hip Hop culture as authenticity is continually linked with a performance that positions 'the artist as experienced knower' (Motley & Henderson, 2008: 250-251). As a result of this, artists are imbued with a certain 'subcultural capital' (Maira, 2000: 337). This is to say that Hip Hop artists are encouraged to try and use their art in a way that is highly self-aware and self-informed while simultaneously spreading awareness and knowledge. Seeing this in light of Anthony Pinn's aforementioned statement at the Menil Panel and keeping in mind that for Gandhi, 'knowledge without character' (1982: 135) is one of seven social sins, it becomes evident that there are more connections than initially apparent.

Hip Hop Pedagogy has been defined as 'a way of authentically and practically incorporating the creative elements of hip-hop into teaching, and inviting students to have a connection with the content while meeting them on their cultural turf by teaching to, and through their realities and experiences' (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015: 67). This ties very naturally into both, knowledge as the fifth element of Hip Hop as well as Gandhi's idea

of using knowledge for the betterment of society, as discussed. The best and most explicit examples of Hip Hop pedagogy and how it parallels Gandhi's ideas can be seen in how it has been used to teach students about the life and legacy of Gandhi. The first example here is that of Flocabulary, a Brooklyn-based education company, whose website houses a module on postcolonialism containing an animated rap video that discusses, amongst other things, how 'Mahatma Gandhi became a symbol of independence and peace' (**Postcolonialism, n.d.**). The video shows the students a back-and-forth between an English man and an Indian woman engaging in a rap battle about Gandhi and his role in the Indian freedom movement. This serves as a perfect example of Hip Hop being used in the classroom teaching material. The next example is that of a Lesson plan by Adam Sussman, a teacher at Methacton School District. In a PowerPoint presentation called '*Gandhi Raps: Co-operative Learning: India- Freedom and Partition*' (**Sussman, n.d.**), he gives detailed instructions for the students to write and perform rap songs based on a five-page chapter about the life of Gandhi, as a classroom activity. With extensively drawn out instructions on both, evaluation and assessment such as '[e]ach rap, rhyme, or song parody must completely describe the assigned event' (**Ibid**), he leaves no stone unturned in ensuring that the students utilize the practice of Hip Hop art in order to learn history. This example goes on to show that not only has Hip Hop been employed as teaching material but also been practiced and ended up disseminating knowledge in and of itself, in formal educational setups, that too in specific relation to the life and ideas of Gandhi.

In speaking of Hip Hop, knowledge, and the betterment of the society, it is imperative to point out that, down the years, Hip Hop has extensively played a role in addressing social issues as well as bringing about a proactive change through awareness campaigns and the use of Hip Hop therapy amongst others. There are however, a few significant examples with the first of these being Music4Peace's Hip Hop Summit in 2010. An initiative with the aim to 'educate, empower, and improve the world beginning with the universal language of music' (**Swagmedia, 2010**), Music4Peace was a collaboration between numerous charities including Hip Hop Summit/Action Network, Tribes of the World, Music4Peace Foundation and The Gandhi Tour (which is run by Arun Gandhi, the grandson of M.K. Gandhi). Their Tour in 2010 included a Hip Hop Summit which would see them go to various locations around the world in an attempt to use Hip Hop to 'promote peace throughout the world' (**Ibid**). The second-most noteworthy example is a Hip Hop concert that was organized at the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Non-violence, in Rochester. Germinating from the idea that Hip Hop was born as an alternative to violence, the concert looked to provide people with 'opportunities to

express themselves in a positive, nonviolent way' (Upadhye, 2015). The third and probably the most notable of such examples was a Hip Hop event that took place at the Gandhi Ashram Sabarmati, in Ahmedabad, India. This is especially significant given that the Ashram 'was home to Mohandas Gandhi from 1917 until 1930 and served as one of the main centres of the Indian freedom struggle' (History, n.d.). The Ashram now hosts children and teaches them arts and crafts besides providing basic education and meals to them. The event in question saw two emcees: Poetik Justis and Dee MC, beat producer HHB and beatboxer Beatraw, from the Bombay Hip Hop scene conduct a workshop with the children. The workshop, in which around 100 children participated, included sessions on rapping, beatboxing and music production using a workstation and saw the artists 'stressing on the importance of knowledge as an element of Hip Hop. They focused on the value of education above all else' (Poetik Justis, 2018). These events serve as clear examples of how in using Hip Hop as a vehicle for social activism, one inherently ends up adhering to Gandhi's idea of knowledge as a virtue while also putting into practice the fifth element of Hip Hop culture in a meaningful way.

'The sagacity of words': Gandhi in/and 21st Century Hip Hop

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand just how much of an influence the life and ideas of Gandhi have had on Hip Hop is to take a look at some of the different ways he has been either referred to, or made the entire subject of Hip Hop art in the 21st century. This section does just that in discussing some of the instances in which Gandhi has been, in some way or the other, part of Hip Hop music performances, since the turn of the 21st century.

The first and perhaps the most apparent example is MC Yogi's '*Be the Change*' (2012). In this song, MC Yogi chronicles the life and legacy of Gandhi and talks about how he was a common man. The music video switches between visuals of various important events that led to the making of Gandhi, with MC Yogi appearing on the screen intermittently with the hook of the song insisting that 'you gotta be the change that you want to see/ in the world, just like Gandhi' (Ibid). The next example in a similar vein is BlaaZe's '*2Pac Meets Gandhi*' (2017). In this song that samples selected excerpts of Gandhi's and Tupac's voices, the Indian rapper imagines a situation where Tupac would meet Gandhi. He goes on to rap about how, despite their drastically different approaches, both Tupac and Gandhi were 'both on the same mission with separate identities' (Ibid). This is not the only occasion BlaaZe spoke about Gandhi in a rap song either: multiple references and songs about Gandhi featured on his debut album titled *Time for Gandhi* (BlaaZe, 2011), which is famous for being India's first Hip Hop protest album. On being asked what inspired

the album, he responded '[t]he Mahatma...the chaos around, and the need to express myself in a truly global Indian way meant, literally, it was time for Gandhi' (BlaaZe, 2017).

A slightly different example of a track where Gandhi is the subject, is a video by a YouTube Channel named *ERB* (Epic Rap Battles of History). Titled '*Gandhi vs Martin Luther King Jr. Epic Rap Battles of History*' (ERB, 2013), the video is a parody, with two of the creators cosplaying as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr respectively, as they trade verses back-and-forth in a rap battle. The video puts a humorously competitive spin on the legacies of the two historic figures, while simultaneously managing to convey the importance of their achievements: 'You want to battle wits, see who's the better pacifist/ I broke the caste system, but you still cannot touch this' (ibid). Within a week, they followed this up by uploading a video titled '*Gandhi vs Martin Luther King Jr. Epic Dance Battles of History*', a break-dance battle between Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr with actors again cosplaying both, on their sister channel *ERB 2*. These videos are examples of parody rap, with Gandhi forming a central figure.

While in these examples Gandhi's presence in the songs can be justified by the fact that they are in one way or the other about Gandhi, there are also other examples where he is explicitly referenced despite not being the focal point of the song. Babu Haabi's '*Bobocanta*' (2016a) is mostly (in)famous for its animated video of Gandhi break-dancing to the foreground of a burning Indian Parliament. While Gandhi is not the central subject of the song, the references to him are quite explicit and prominent with Babu Haabi at one point rapping:

*Kehte hai majboori ka naam hota hai Mahatma Gandhi,ⁱⁱ
Ladta raha mai akela, badhti rahi yeh aandhi.
Satyagraha se kuch na mila, jhooth ka jhanda lehraya,
Kuch na hote hue bhi ameer maine khudko paaya...*

*[They say helplessness' name is Mahatma Gandhi,
I kept fighting alone, this windstorm kept getting bigger.
Gained nothing from Satyagraha so I waved the flag of lies,
Despite having nothing I found myself rich...]* (Babu Haabi, 2016a)

Speaking of why he referenced Gandhi the way he did in his song, Babu Haabi said that it was his interpretation of how Gandhi would react if he saw the dire state of affairs in the country he gave his life for, going on to call it Gandhi's present-day '*tandav*'ⁱⁱⁱ (2016b). '*Bobocanta*', hence, serves as a unique example which uses the ideas of Gandhi to offer a perspective on the current state of affairs in India. With a reference to Gandhi in the title as well as the hook line: 'Slow down Gandhi, you're killing 'em' (Sage Francis, 2004); American rapper Sage Francis' '*Slow Down Gandhi*' (2004)

is another prime example of Gandhi being referred to in a rap song, despite not being one of the central subjects of the track itself. Sage Francis stated that the song was meant to be a scathing attack on ‘fly-by-night activists who get caught up in political fervor every election year and then they fall by the wayside when the party is over’ (Sage Francis, 2009). The hook of the song, hence, can be understood as a sarcastic hit at these activists. In addition to these, there have also been works which have made just titular references to Gandhi. One such example would be American underground Hip Hop group Jedi Mind Tricks’ *Visions of Gandhi* (2003). In commenting on why they chose to title their album that, rapper Vinnie Paz remarked that ‘this is a time right now that the world and society need someone like Gandhi’ (2006). The title of their album, hence, can be seen as their tribute to Gandhi. The final example, for this article, is that of a Belgian rapper who goes by the stage name Gandhi. It has been pointed out that: ‘Using the pseudonym Gandhi, he does not claim to possess the sagacity of the spiritual leader. Rather, for him, it symbolises ‘the sagacity of words’’ (Gandhi - Dour Festival 2010, n.d.). Hence, given that several artists have rapped about, made references to, or paid tributes to Gandhi in their work, it is amply clear that he has inspired a lot of work within the Hip Hop culture.

Conclusion

As pointed out by Belgian rapper Gandhi, both Gandhi and Hip Hop culture have been keen proponents of the power of words and ideas. Both of them, in various capacities, speak of knowledge as an empowering tool to bring about social change. Gandhi’s insistence on non-violence as the way forward and the legacy of Hip Hop as a reaction to violence, certainly seem to tie the two together. Given Gandhi’s conception of *satyagraha* as a non-violent form of resistance and Hip Hop’s foundational roots as an art form largely associated with non-violent protest that still pervade it, one cannot help but acknowledge that the two belong to a similar lineage of thought, if not the same. Furthermore, given Hip Hop culture’s proactive engagement in combating social issues worldwide through means of non-violent artistic expression, one can conclude that it is inextricably linked with some of the ideas propagated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi:

The non-violence of my conception is a more active and more real fighting against wickedness than retaliation whose very nature is to increase wickedness... I seek entirely to blunt the edge of the tyrant's sword, not by putting up against it a sharper-edged weapon, but by disappointing his expectation that I would be offering physical resistance. (Gandhi, 1996: 162)

This article, hence, seeks to have fleshed out the relevance of the ideas of Gandhi in this day and age, using Hip Hop, a predominantly youth culture, as a pivot. This could be seen as an indication of the longevity of the legacy of Gandhi, in that it is so inextricably linked with a culture that only seems to be expanding its reach with the passage of time. As previously pointed out, this article has not dealt at length with the relevance of Gandhi's ideas and philosophy in the domains of education and social activism. Neither has it exhaustively looked at references to Gandhi in Hip Hop music, with several relatively minor and self-explanatory references skipped altogether. A more detailed inquiry into either of these, hence, represents the prospective scope of future study.

Acknowledgments and Dedication

This article is based on a lecture titled 'Gandhi and 21st Century Hip-Hop', that the author delivered across various educational and research institutes in 2019, as part of an Education and Outreach Initiative to raise awareness about prominent figures and events in the Indian Freedom Movement, by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), under the Government of India

The author expresses his gratitude to Prof Sujit Kumar Ghosh, Chairman at MAKAIAS, who conceived the idea of this Education and Outreach Initiative. He also thanks Dr. Nabajit Kumar Das, for his unerring faith and support with the lecture.

The author dedicates this article to Prof. Hari Shankar Vasudevan, who sadly passed away due to COVID-19. This lecture wouldn't have been anywhere remotely close to as successful as it was, if it weren't for Prof. Vasudevan's kind and encouraging words the first time it was delivered.

Elloit Cardozo is an independent researcher with interests in Hip Hop Studies, Film & Media Studies, and Countercultures. He holds a Master's Degree in English from the University of Mumbai, where his dissertation comparatively studied Dadaism, and Albert Camus' Absurdist thought as countercultural worldviews. He has been the recipient of multiple research fellowships by institutes under the Ministries of Culture, and Information & Broadcasting, Government of India. His work on Hip Hop has previously appeared in Intellect Books' Global Hip Hop Studies (GHHS), besides having been presented at conferences by the University of Leiden, and the University of Konstanz amongst others.



Elloit is also a coordinator for Show & Prove Mumbai, an upcoming collaborative conference with the University of California Riverside, set to be the first ever conference on Hip Hop Studies in India.

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To cite this article:

Cardozo, E., 2021. 'The Sagacity of Words': Gandhi and 21st Century Hip Hop. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 8(3), 1-12. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v8i3.652>.

Endnotes

ⁱ a global Hip-Hop awareness group "dedicated to knowledge, non-violence, and healthy living" (Gosa, 2015: 70)

ⁱⁱ a Hindi equivalent for the English idiom "desperate times call for desperate measures"

ⁱⁱⁱ first danced by, and mostly associated with the god Shiva, it "covers all dance which expresses actions and feelings with strength and vigour" (Massey, 2014: 32)