

## The gospel of hip hop: a re-encounter with *negritude*

### ARTICLE

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1

#### Abstract

The hip hop movement is one of the cultures most widely embraced by predominantly Black and peripheral communities, offering them an alternative possibility beyond subalternity, physical death, and existential erasure. Due to this emancipatory essence, as a cultural movement it constantly faces orchestrated attacks and systematic persecution aimed at delegitimizing the transformative power it exerts in the lives of peripheral youth. In dialogue with important authors such as Aimé Césaire, Clóvis Moura, and Aníbal Quijano, this work seeks to analyze hip hop as a historically diasporic cultural movement that affirms Black and peripheral existences through Negritude as a core value.

**Keywords:** Hip hop. Negritude. Cultural Resistance. Colonialism. Diaspora.

#### As Boas Novas do Hip Hop: A negritude encontrada

#### Resumo

O movimento hip hop é uma das culturas mais acessadas por pessoas majoritariamente negras e periféricas e traz para essas pessoas uma possibilidade outra que não a subalternidade, a morte física e a existencial. Por ter essa essência emancipatória, enquanto movimento cultural, sofre constantemente ataques e perseguições orquestradas, a fim de deslegitimar o poder transformador que exerce na vida de jovens periféricos. Em diálogo com importantes autores como Aimé Césaire, Clóvis Moura e Aníbal Quijano, buscaremos neste trabalho analisar o hip hop como um movimento cultural historicamente diaspórico, que atua positivando existências negras e periféricas a partir da negritude como valor.

**Palavras-chave:** Hip hop. Negritude. Resistência cultural. Colonialidade. Diáspora.

### 1 Introduction

Brazil is an independent, democratic, and capitalist country. We can affirm that we are no longer in the Portuguese colonial period; however, the marks of colonization remain deeply embedded in our society. Colonization, as a political and economic system in which one nation is under the control of another to serve Europe's economic interests, may have come to an end; yet *coloniality*, that is, the remnants of the colonial era, persists. The false "discovery" of the Americas divided the world into races: Black, mixed-race, Asian, olive-

skinned, and white (Quijano, 2005). The colonized peoples were then defined by the “victors,” those who held power and were seen as superior in knowledge and culture, while others were deemed inferior and therefore subaltern, unworthy of being treated with humanity.

2

The process of *reification* took place through the relationship of subjugation and violence inherent in colonization. Devoid of human contact, the colonizer in the role of overseer and the colonized as an instrument of production became mere things, objects at the master’s disposal (Césaire, 2020). Within this racial hierarchy, the Black person was placed as inferior and therefore deemed enslaveable. Stripped of humanity, during the era of enslavement, they were treated as merchandise, turned into the private property of the white master. We know that this division of labor and class was structured through racialization. In the current capitalist system, this racial classification remains central to society: the former white colonizer now occupies the best jobs, while the formerly colonized, Black and Indigenous peoples, hold the lowest-paid positions, those considered manual and unskilled. Those regarded as minorities in society, highlighted here as the Black population, despite the transition from Colonial Brazil to the New Republic, continue to be exploited.

Labor, social relations, and relations of power and knowledge remain permeated by the idea of race formed during the Colonial period. Here, I will highlight the *coloniality of being* (Maldonado-Torres, 2022), which is intrinsically linked to the normalization of warlike conditions. For those whose bodies are marked by coloniality, death and violence are daily realities. The colonial body is not seen as a being; it is invisible to human rights, regarded as an object, a target to be eliminated. It lives, therefore, in a constant state of war, condemned to die before its time. In the face of this reality, the Black colonial body reacts against the denial of its humanity with a cry that demands recognition of its existence.

We know that the 1988 Federal Constitution establishes as social rights education, health, food, work, housing, transportation, leisure, security, social welfare, protection of motherhood and childhood, and assistance to those in need. However, the reality lived daily by this population reveals the absence of protection for these rights inherent to any

individual on Brazilian soil. According to Wallerstein (1993), in the absence of faith in the State to solve the great fractures of society, groups turn to self-organization. In search of viable forms of existence, socially marginalized groups gather collectively. This was true for Black people during slavery, through *quilombos*, and it remains so today. The hip-hop movement can be considered one of these collective movements that begin with the union of equals as an alternative struggle for life.

At first, this study sought to present the context of coloniality and the central place of the racial question in Brazil. Subsequently, we propose a reflection on the hip-hop movement as a Black and peripheral cultural expression that emerges as a diasporic force, a collective alternative born of a history of scarcity, offering social and existential empowerment to its Black and marginalized participants. Through rhymes, reports, and the theoretical foundations of authors such as Aimé Césaire, Clóvis Moura, and Aníbal Quijano, we argue that hip hop fosters the valorization of Black identity, contributing to the formation of critical and conscious identities, and that, because of its transformative potential for peripheral youth, it remains a political-cultural movement constantly targeted by attempts at criminalization.

## 2 In the power of Hip Hop: the reinvention of black being

The creation of the hip-hop movement is directly connected to the *Black Atlantic*, the forced journey of Black people to different continents around the world. The Black diaspora has long lived in close contact with physical and mental violence and, for that reason, has had to find cracks within the chaos to remain alive both physically and existentially. Art, within the context of enslavement, was directly related to life; it was the only way to freely express needs and desires (Gilroy, 2001). It is important to highlight that the culture of enslaved Black people was not valued by the masters, as it was understood to be inferior, worthless, and exotic. For example, *capoeira*, in which Black people refined their fighting techniques, was interpreted merely as dance. The *griot*, the oral tradition of storytelling that served as cultural preservation, was seen simply as a pastime for the enslaved, a way to

prevent political uprisings. Over time, Black culture began to be perceived as a potential threat to white social order and has since been constantly subjected to delegitimization and criminalization.

4

Historically, Black people were placed in the category of passive beings, incapable of being agents with intellectual history or creativity. Yet one of the fastest-growing cultural movements in the world is born from this very people. The hip-hop movement emerges as a diasporic response to capitalism. In the 1970s, in the Bronx, a borough of New York City, with living conditions far below the minimum standards, the Black and Latino population found themselves struggling daily for survival, often turning to gangs as a means of getting by. The awakening of consciousness among those from the same place, sharing the same oppressions and hardships and realizing that their actions were feeding their own destruction, led to collective organization no longer in gangs, but in pursuit of better living conditions for Black and Latino people. The solution they found was transforming gangs into community organizations. In a short time, the territory once marked by physical fights became a stage for DJs and artistic battles. Later, these gatherings evolved into the organized cultural movement of hip hop.

Looking more closely at the movement as it developed on Brazilian soil, hip hop emerged as a culture initially organized around associations in favelas and peripheral areas, offering a means of escaping daily violence through community work expressed in music, dance, and painting. With its core gatherings taking place in public squares and open spaces where Black people formed the majority, there was greater opportunity for exchange among peers, creating an alternative to the racism experienced daily in other settings (Teperman, 2015). It is important to define the term *hip hop* to clarify what is discussed in this article. According to Schloss (2009), the first meaning refers to different forms of art – visual, musical, and bodily – as a lived and collectively shared cultural experience, not necessarily connected to the media. In Brazil, we can identify such expressions in cultural circles and freestyle rap battles. The second meaning refers to the musical genre *rap* as a product directly tied to the music industry, whether mainstream or

underground. The third meaning relates to attitude, as a generalized representation of a peripheral and Black body, which is often interpreted in a pejorative way.

5

From its origin, the definition of race excluded Black participation, as Black people were subject only to external determination and characterization by the white Other. We already understand that colonization acted to destroy a people's memory. The references to what it means to be Black in Brazilian lands were built upon a history of violence and shaped by a deprecative Eurocentric gaze. With no space to build a singular Black being, identity was denied, since the past was erased and rewritten by others. The Black person, therefore, became uprooted. This is what Veiga (2019) calls the "diaspora effect," the feeling of not belonging or being included in social dynamics except in a subaltern position. It is thus necessary to recover the past so that Black people may rediscover themselves ontologically. According to Césaire (2010), Black protagonism and autonomy would only be possible from the moment the Black person embraced race both culturally and politically; ignoring it is not an option. Claiming that "we are all equal" means refusing to confront a problem that has existed for centuries. *Negritude* therefore arises as an antiracist reaction born from the de-alienation of Black people, a collective demand for social transformation. We may thus consider that the hip-hop movement contributes, through collective creation, to the recovery of Black identities – the reconstruction of what it means to be Black, no longer defined by others but by Black people themselves, that is, the encounter with *negritude*.

[...] It cannot remain in a condition of objectification and passive acceptance; it culminates in revolt, transforming solidarity and fraternity into weapons of struggle. *Negritude* becomes a permanent call for all the heirs of this condition to engage in the fight to reclaim the values of their destroyed civilizations and denied cultures [...] it is part of the process of recovering their collective identity. (Munanga, 2009, p. 15)

When we speak of *negritude*, we understand that Black people, throughout their history of subalternity, face specific problems and must address them on their own: the alienation from their bodies, color, culture, and history. It is necessary to become aware of these problems in order to construct one's being, and this, according to Munanga (2009),

functions as a kind of group therapy. By eliminating their inferiority complex, they can then stand “on equal footing with other oppressed peoples, which is a preliminary condition for collective struggle.” (p. 14) Accepting the mark of *negritude* in one’s body is the first step toward reclaiming Black being. Within the hip-hop movement, aesthetics, color, hair, and clothing have always played an important role in the culture. It is often through these elements that *negritude* begins to be reclaimed, before extending to intellectual, moral, and psychological dimensions.

In order to understand the cultural hip-hop movement, which organizes itself through collectivity, we draw upon Clóvis Moura’s (2019) concepts of groups. According to the author, the differentiated group is one identified by a mark attributed to it by the hegemonic other; its differences are then evaluated according to the values of a class-based society. The group, in this position, is treated as a mere object, devoid of interiority or substance. Black people in Brazilian society carry a distinguishing mark that is associated with inferiority; from this, negative stereotypes are created to reinforce that idea, such as supposed ugliness, lack of intelligence, or inclination toward crime, among others. Seen as an object, all are treated as a uniform bloc, without individuality; there is, therefore, a standardization of behavior imposed upon the oppressed and marginalized group. The specific group, on the other hand, differs from the previous one because it possesses interiority; this occurs when members of the group themselves come to see that they are perceived as different by the broader society and by others who do not bear the same mark. By gaining awareness of this difference, they reframe the distinguishing mark in a positive way.

We can consider that the cultural hip-hop movement initially presents itself as a specific group from the moment its participants, mostly Black, recognize that they are treated differently within society and therefore require a space of belonging, a place where they can exist authentically. In order not to be completely marginalized in a capitalist society that affirms whiteness as the only positive standard, Black people come together to defend their human condition. Within this group, Black individuals are not a minority; their distinguishing mark does not signify inferiority; their beauty is exalted in its diversity; their

knowledge, skills, and voices are valued. It is a movement that upholds *negritude* as a principle. Considering rappers as specific intellectuals, Cannavô *et al.* (2025, p. 15) points out:

They aim to challenge and subvert the norm, thus producing insurgency through the possibility of deconstruction, which entails the redefinition of the social issues represented in their music, such as the reappropriation of the term “Black,” detaching it from its negative connotation and imbuing it with ethnic belonging and a sense of beauty and pride.

7

As previously mentioned, when we speak of *hip hop*, there are different meanings. The hip-hop movement, not yet fully tied to the cultural industry, can more easily be identified as a specific group. Within the music industry, especially the mainstream, there is a process of integration, an opening of the movement to penetrate class-based society, for example through less politicized rap with an entertainment focus, which therefore becomes more accepted and listened to by different social groups. This is a complex issue that will not be deeply addressed in this article, but it is important to note that historically the hip-hop movement has taken on a social role in addressing issues relevant to minority groups, and the possibility of this reality being transformed is frequently discussed within the movement itself.

It is important to emphasize that the hip-hop movement is composed primarily of Black people, although not exclusively. The presence of diverse participants, each with their own singularities, is fundamental to the strengthening and advancement of this cultural movement. Such diversity contributes to building a collective space in which experiences interact and complement one another. In the cultural hip-hop movement, which functions as a tool of expression and resistance, there is a continuous process of mutual learning aimed at transforming social relations. As Encarnação (2024, p. 115) highlights, something is collectively built among these participants that “aims at inclusive sociability and, through its principles of respect, allows those treated as minorities in our society, Black people, women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIAPN+ individuals, to become subjects with critical awareness.”

Freestyle rap battles, which usually take place weekly in public squares across different Brazilian states, hold social, educational, and political potential. These gatherings function as arenas of expression, self-affirmation, and collective knowledge-building. Through improvisation, rappers are able to convey their experiences, joys, sorrows, and critiques, disseminating knowledge and helping to develop the critical awareness of their listeners. As an example, I present an improvised rhyme by Gomes, an MC from Brasília, performed during a battle at the *Batalha da Juventude* in São Paulo.

My best friend died when I was twelve years old. He was shot five times in the face. You know how it is in the Federal District, Mateusinho from Samambaia. He used crack, sold coke, smoked weed, and also used cocaine. You know what the greatest sorrow of my life is? That he never got to know the freestyle battles. (Gomes)

The reality of Brazil's peripheral communities is not very different from that experienced in the Bronx in the 1970s. In the face of scarce opportunities, many young people are consumed by the oppressions and hardships they face daily. For some, the hip-hop movement emerges as another possible path. This was the case for Gomes, who laments not having been able to introduce this collective to a friend who needed that cultural outlet. Rhymes become instruments for processing grief, offering social critique, and affirming the transformative power of the hip-hop movement.

Beyond the dissemination of information, the cultural movement can serve as a space for self-knowledge or even identity formation, as we have already emphasized throughout this article: the encounter with *negritude*. When faced with another who is an equal, someone who carries within themselves similar traces of history, culture, and struggle, it becomes possible to recognize oneself in the other and in their potentialities, which can then be developed within oneself. It is a powerful process that breaks with colonial narratives of Black bodily inferiority. Doprê, an MC from Guarulhos, highlights in the *Batalha da Linear* in São Paulo the importance of his opponent Jotapê in this journey of reconnection with his *negritude*:

Maybe you don't even know it, but you're the one who taught me to be Black. One day this guy came up to me and said, "Hey bro, can I shape your hair?" I said, "Do

you think it'll look good?" He said, "Trust me," shaped it like this, "look in the mirror," I looked: love at first sight. (Doprê)

9

A simple moment marks the beginning of a new relationship with oneself, mediated by the gaze and care of someone alike. It is not only about aesthetics but about a reconnection with oneself that had been lost in a past shaped by coloniality. In this sense, hip hop functions as a space for emotional and symbolic re-education, where *negritude* holds value and takes center stage, enabling the emergence of conscious subjects.

### 3 Hip Hop in the Crosshairs: The Fight Against the Voice of the Periphery

The hip-hop movement holds transformative power. For some people, the first contact with the culture happens through a rap song played on the radio, on TV, on social media, or on streaming platforms. The discourse of rap lyrics, which narrate the everyday life of the periphery, provokes a strong sense of identification in listeners who experience the same reality. Others may come to know the culture more deeply through a cultural circle or a freestyle battle in their neighborhood. Whether through the music industry or the street movement, seeing Black and peripheral people who speak the same slang, come from the same places, and face similar social and racial issues helps to ease the feeling of displacement, allowing the possibility of finding a place in the world, of being someone other than the shadow painted by whiteness. While within the hip-hop collective one may find the strength necessary to exist, outside it the third concept described by Schloss (2009) emerges: people who associate aggressiveness, lack of manners, and lack of education with the image of a young Black man wearing baggy clothes listening to *Racionais* or, in a more contemporary context, a young man wearing gold chains and soccer jerseys listening to Orochi or Poze do Rodo.

In 2023, as part of the celebration of fifty years of hip hop, a major initiative was organized across several Brazilian states to recognize hip hop as cultural heritage. Public events were held in city councils, though these were not well received by certain lawmakers. One case stands out: in Curitiba, a city councilman from the *Partido*

Progressistas (PP), during a vote to recognize hip hop as an intangible cultural heritage of Paraná, linked the cultural movement to criminality:

10

[...] I question the morality of this, since this hip-hop thing, I would say, is a terrible influence on our youth and has roots, a history directly connected to criminality [...] What is hip hop for? To teach our youth, to tell them that crime pays, it is the culture of glorifying misery, flaunting the vilest things, sexist, it is everything that is worst, and we still have a subgenre of hip hop, *funk carioca*, which treats women like dogs, so that is what hip hop is<sup>1</sup>

Street hip-hop culture constantly faces the difficulties of carrying out a cultural movement in public squares. Conflict with state instruments such as the police and municipal guards is frequent. It is important to note how difficult it is to point to quantitative data for this kind of reality. Because it is a culture practiced in the street, most often on a weekly basis, the organizers of freestyle battles and cultural circles do not usually give wide publicity to incidents, both due to their recurrence and the possible risk of reprisals. Only when situations get out of control, beyond the already naturalized symbolic violence, do news reports get triggered and MCs and organizers use their social media to recount what happened. On May 5, 2022, a police action in *Cabo Frio/RJ* generated great internal outrage within the movement and was even reported by traditional media, a brutal action that became the target of the Public Prosecutor's Office of the State of Rio de Janeiro. The *Batalha do Mantém*, located in the *Manoel Corrêa* community, was interrupted by police gunfire. Officers destroyed speakers and caused a stampede among the young people and children present in the square. According to a piece in *Folha de S.Paulo*, "[...] one of the police officers said that if anyone resisted, he would shoot them in the head, that rap is a bum's thing and that culture belongs in school, until 6 p.m."<sup>2</sup>. In *Londrina*, in the state of Paraná, the *Batalha da Leste* was targeted on August 20, 2023. In a square with about 500 young people, a group of police officers approached participants with shoves, insults, and

<sup>1</sup> Câmara Municipal de Curitiba. Sessão Ordinária - 25/04/2023. Youtube, 25 abril 2025. Disponível em: <https://www.youtube.com/live/9LSK5d2Jb5A?si=UaDi3S1uei8AitWf>. Acesso em: 2 maio 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Policiais interrompem a tiros batalha de rap com crianças e adolescentes no RJ. Folha de São Paulo, 2022. Disponível em: <https://folha.com/cnai2ymp>. Acesso em: 2 maio 2025.

threats<sup>3</sup>. The *Batalha da Aldeia*, considered today the largest freestyle battle in Brazil, faces reprisals at least once a year to clear out of the *Praça dos Estudantes* in *Barueri*. Bob 13, one of the organizers, highlights:

11

We have no public funding [...] we appropriated the squares because that is what squares are for, we have gone through many changes over these eight years, we had to keep our heads down many times, we did face police repression and oppression, we were invited to leave that place several times, but we have always had our strength, which is the people, which is the internet, which is the people who see us in a positive light and help us.

Whether through symbolic violence, which in this case prevents Black and peripheral people from accessing culture without facing delegitimization or devaluation, or through physical violence, which assaults young people and children for taking part in a cultural movement, the dominant group relies on its hegemony over public and private institutions, using that power to impose upon society certain rules, norms, and cultural standards that, in turn, can hinder the social advancement of minorities such as Black people, women, and LGBTQIAPN+ individuals. Any initiative, therefore, that seeks to promote a peripheral culture or to uplift a population still living on the margins of society is treated by some as an affront.

The process of delegitimizing and criminalizing peripheral culture is directly tied to racism and classism. However, in this work, I emphasize that the hip-hop movement holds the power to transform the Black and peripheral being, and this makes it a threat to the very groups that have been hegemonic in Brazilian society for centuries, since the population historically labeled as inferior is finally coming to know its history, its oppressors, and its potential for struggle. The hegemonic group will do whatever it takes, using the weapons it possesses – institutional, economic, and ideological power – to protect its place at the top.

<sup>3</sup> Grupo de batalhas de rima apontam abordagem agressiva da polícia. Folha de Londrina, 2023. Disponível em: <https://www.folhadelondrina.com.br/geral/grupo-de-batalhas-de-rima-aponta-abordagem-agressiva-da-policia-3239210e.html?d=1>. Acesso em: 2 ago. 2025.

Clóvis Moura (2021, p. 27) points out that “[...] when speaking of the Brazilian Black person, it is often said that he was an excellent slave and, today, is a terrible citizen.” This idea is rooted in the white perspective: the excellent slave was the one who did not rebel, did not flee to the *quilombos*, did not protest, accepted punishment, and submitted socially, ideologically, and psychologically to the standards of the masters. The terrible citizen, an idea built upon the image of the contemporary Black person, refers to the free Black individual who becomes aware of their place in society, of the barriers they will have to face, and who revolts, whether individually or collectively. The Black person considered a bad citizen is the one who refuses to be an object of mere entertainment or servitude. It is the one who, in some way, seeks a way out, participating in what Moura calls “projective movements” (p. 29). The Black person within the hip-hop movement is thus labeled as the “terrible citizen,” one who has a voice to proclaim their reality and the possibility of achieving social advancement through a projective movement that raises social and racial issues across different times and spaces.

## 4 Final considerations

The right to culture, especially when it refers to the expressions of Black and peripheral populations, remains in constant dispute in Brazil. This right, which in practice is denied, demands ongoing defense, argumentation, and legitimization in the face of perspectives that still regard certain cultural expressions as “lesser,” exotic, violent, or unworthy of recognition. This has been the case throughout Brazilian history. The disqualification of cultural movements rooted in Black experience and resistance, such as *samba* in the early decades of the twentieth century, Black recreational clubs, and African-based religions, were and often still are targets of persecution, stigmatization, and criminalization.

This reality continues today through the marginalization of Black cultural organizations such as *funk* and *hip hop*, which, although they now occupy important spaces within the contemporary cultural industry, continue to face prejudice, repression, and

attempts at silencing. These forms of expression are not merely sources of entertainment or leisure; they also serve as vehicles for community organization, social critique, and the reclaiming of identity, especially among Black and peripheral youth. To delegitimize the hip-hop movement is, therefore, to attempt to silence those whom society has always refused to hear.

13

The hip-hop movement advances and, through the strength of its people, occupies spaces where the State has historically been absent, spaces of education, culture, and leisure, and where the State is present, it often appears in the form of repression, violence, and death. Experienced primarily by a Black and peripheral population, which is surrounded by barriers imposed by racism, hip hop becomes a tool for affirmation, the construction of subjectivities, and collective empowerment that transcends these boundaries.

The colonial body is a non-being marked by invisibility in relation to its rights as a human and by excessive visibility in relation to violence and death. We can consider that the hip-hop movement is a space that allows the colonial body, through encounters with others, to question the role of coloniality itself. This movement seeks not only recognition as a being but also acknowledgment as a creator of knowledge and of new possibilities.

In this context, hip hop acts as a field of both symbolic and material resistance, where artistic production also becomes knowledge production and struggle. By creating these spaces of voice and visibility, the movement enables historically subalternized bodies to breathe, exist, and project possible futures, even amid scarcity. Thus, hip hop not only denounces structural oppression but also proposes other ways of being, existing, and resisting in the world, different from those dictated by the hegemonic white model.

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15

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