

## “THE ULTIMATE DRIVE BY”: RACIONAIS MC’S, ICE CUBE, AND THE PURSUIT OF BLACKNESS

*O derradeiro “drive by”: Racionais Mc’s e  
Ice Cube em busca do “ser-negro”*

PAULO DUTRA 

University of New Mexico. Albuquerque, NM, United States.

E-mail: [pdutra@unm.edu](mailto:pdutra@unm.edu)

### ABSTRACT

Considering that hip-hop music is the foremost contemporary artistic expression of Black lives I discuss American rapper Ice Cube’s track “I wanna Kill Sam” and Brazilian group *Racionais Mc’s*’s track “*Racistas otários*”. The two tracks have in common the fact that they address the experiences of Black people through their relationship with public policies and institutions that claim to promote the emancipation of Black people in Brazil and in the USA. I, then, demonstrate that the *Racionais* and Ice Cube symbolically (re)dimension contemporary “Blackness” as a result of the constant physical and symbolic clashes that started back in the slavery regime.

**Keywords:** Rap, blackness, Racionais Mc’s, Ice Cube.

### RESUMO

Considerando que o rap é a principal expressão artística contemporânea do “ser-negro”, faz-se aqui uma aproximação dos raps “Racistas otários,” dos Racionais Mc’s, e “*I Wanna Kill Sam*,” do rapper americano (ex-integrante do grupo N.W.A.) Ice Cube. As duas faixas têm em comum o fato de abordarem as experiências de afrodescendentes por meio de sua relação com políticas públicas e instituições que alegam promover a emancipação das pessoas afrodescendentes no Brasil e nos EUA. Demonstro, ainda, que os Racionais e Ice Cube (re)dimensionam simbolicamente o “ser-negro” contemporâneo como resultado dos constantes embates físicos e simbólicos que tiveram início no regime escravista.

**Palavras-chave:** Rap, afro-descendência, Racionais Mc’s, Ice Cube.

### EDITORES:

Regina Zilberman  
Gerson Roberto Neumann

SUBMETIDO: 06.12.2020

ACEITO: 01.02.2021

### COMO CITAR:

DUTRA, Paulo. “The Ultimate Drive by”: Racionais Mc’s, Ice Cube, and the Pursuit of Blackness. *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada*, v. 23, n. 43, p. 42-55, mai.-ago., 2021. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2596-304x20212343pd>

Hip-hop is still fundamentally an art form that traffics in hyperbole, parody, kitsch, dramatic license, double entendres, signification, and other literary and artistic conventions to get its points across. (DYSON, 2004, p. xii)

## LET’S GET IT GOING, Y’ALL!

After several decades of armor-piercing scholarship, now that mainstream’s security door is busted and rap has claimed a place within scholarly discourse, more central issues than the irritating (though inevitable) task of constantly proving rap’s (self-evident) artistic nature can finally be addressed. As Todd Boyd points out, “rap music is the most visible form of African American cultural expression in contemporary society” (2004, p. 325). Consequently, rap reached other popular and academic audiences not only locally but also abroad due to the impact of American cultural influence worldwide. Although rap welcomes a vast variety of approaches from virtually any discipline in the humanities, comparative studies between American and Brazilian rap is one of the fields that remains rather underexplored. As a contribution to filling such a gap, I carry out a comparison between American rapper Ice Cube’s and Brazilian rap group *Racionais Mc’s*’s lyrics. My goal is to show that *Racionais Mc’s* and Ice Cube symbolically (re)dimension contemporary “Blackness” as a result of the constant physical and symbolic clashes that started back in the slavery regime.

Whether in the United States or in Brazil, hip-hop experienced<sup>1</sup> a period when popular and especially academic approaches denied its artistic value. Tricia Rose mentions one specific instance of such a reception. When she informed a chairman of a department of music in the United States in 1989 that she was studying rap, the chairman replied that she must have been “writing on rap’s social impact and political lyrics, because there is nothing to the music” (Rose, 1994, p. 62). As Michael Eric Dyson notes, “there are few parallels to this heavy-handed wrong-headedness in the criticism of other art forms like films, plays, or visual art, especially when they are authored by non-blacks” (2004, p. xii). Certainly “that cultural bias – and unapologetic ignorance – [that] informs many assaults on the genre” (Dyson, 2004, p. xii) remains a reality. Nonetheless, such a practice says considerably more about the critic’s mentality than about hip-hop music because

many critics [...] don’t account for the complex ways that some hip-hop artists play with stereotypes to either subvert or reverse them [...] its critics often fail to acknowledge that hip-hop is neither sociological commentary nor political criticism, though it may certainly function in these modes through its artists’ lyrics. (DYSON, 2004, p. xii)

Of course, Ice Cube’s and *Racionais Mc’s*’s lyrics introduce sociological commentary and political criticism. However, following Dyson’s approach, I shall concentrate my examination on the artistic means and conventions through which they get their points across.

There is at least one clear distinction between scholarship on rap in Brazil and in the United States. Regardless of their intended outcomes, in the United States, racial issues, in opposition to class struggle, have been the chief element addressed by the critics. In Brazil, critics developed an opposite approach, which favored discussions on class struggle over race in rap. As Jennifer Roth-Gordon

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<sup>1</sup> They still experience this except in specific departments and places where they’re embraced.

notes, “while the press and public have lauded rappers’ attention to socioeconomic inequality and conditions of daily life in Brazil’s social and geographic periphery, there has been overwhelming disdain for their direct discussion of Brazilian racism” (2009, p. 70). This posture is also truthful for scholars such as Ricardo Terperman who argues that: “*Racionais*’s lyrics attack the perpetuation of inequality, racism, police violence and other ills of Brazilian society. They do so by assuming a clear position in a class structure, in direct opposition to what they themselves understand as the ruling class (2014, p. 78).<sup>2</sup> Terperman makes no reference to the fact that a majority of white people make up Brazil’s class so-called “ruling class”.

The tradition of favoring class structure over race is one of the outcomes of the myth of racial democracy that ruled and still rules social relations in Brazil since the aftermath of slavery. That is why “within the context of social democracy, overt racial conflict, legal separatism, and identity politics are readily viewed as ‘un-Brazilian’, and socioeconomic class remains the most common (and accepted) way to interpret inequality” (ROTH-GORDON, 2009, p. 70). In the United States, segregation was the tactic employed, therefore the establishment of a racial democracy was never contemplated. This is one fundamental different between African American and afro-Brazilian societies. While in Brazil there is no such concept as “afro-Brazilian society” because afro-Brazilians *are* (physically and symbolically) the lower social class, in the United States the existence of an African American society with its socioeconomic classes is a reality. These facts have a great influence on how scholarship approaches rap in the two countries. Because class struggle within African American society exists, Boyd believes that

more often than not, questions of race dominate both popular and critical discussions about rap music. Though this discussion is undoubtedly important, contemporary society, especially in the post-Reagan/Bush era, forces us to deal with the influence of the class struggle on African American society. (2004, p. 326)

The opposite path is the more urgent one in the case of Brazilian rap’s criticism. Though the discussions on class struggle are important, contemporary re-examination of the history of the rather uncordial race relations in Brazil should force us all to deal with the patent and central place race has in the aesthetics of Brazilian rap.

Certainly the 1990’s was a prolific time for rappers. In Brazil, *Racionais Mc’s* launched two studio albums, two extended plays, and one compilation album. In the United States, Ice Cube, a former member of “The World’s most Dangerous Group”, N.W.A., launched four studio albums and one extended play. In the interest of conciseness, I focus on Ice Cube’s track “I wanna Kill Sam” (1991) from the album *Death Certificate* and *Racionais Mc’s*’s track “*Racistas otários*” (1990) from the album *Holocausto Urbano* in order to discuss how they artistically address the contemporary experiences of Black<sup>3</sup> people.

2 Unless indicated otherwise all the translation are mine.

3 Following Haki R. Madhubuti’s steps I capitalize the word Black “when referring to people of African ancestry and of the African Diaspora” (3).

## “I WANNA KILL SAM”

In 1991, Ice Cube launched his third solo career record (second studio album): *Death Certificate*. Playing with conventions of that time, when albums used to have two sides, Cube feeds the listeners a taste of the album’s structure and also a commentary in the introductory track, “The funeral”:

Niggas are in a state of emergency  
The death side: a mirror image of where we are today  
The life side: a vision of where we need to go  
So sign your death certificate (1991, track 1)

Because the current reality of African American culture needs a full reboot, is the ultimate goal to be achieved, according to the aesthetic proposal of the album is metaphorically dying and being born again. The call, directed towards Black people, to take action, sign their own death certificate, and leave behind certain way of life, involves a change of mind and attitude before existence, and a social reality that drives Black people to a real death sentence alluded to in “the death side: a mirror image of where we are today” (1991, track 1). The doubled voiced play with the actual deaths of Black people and the metaphorical one that shall purge Black people’s practices from the lingering legacies of slavery is therefore the aesthetic basis of the whole album and of the (originally) 20 tracks.

In this process of disposing of “where we are today” and moving towards “where we need to go”, a truly complete repagination is in order; thus, side B poetically introduces and discusses possibilities for paths to be followed, ways of achieving the goal, and measures to be taken. Hence, it is only natural that the opening track of side B is an invocation titled “The birth” and the first actual track is “I wanna Kill Sam”. Understanding who the enemy is and killing Sam because “he ain’t my motherfuckin Uncle!” (1991, track 13) is the initial step that must be taken after overcoming the “death side” (what it implies<sup>4</sup>) and being reborn. Finding and targeting such an enemy is a significantly harder task, nonetheless, because “is he in Watts, Oakland, Philly or Brooklyn? / It seems like he got the whole country behind him / So it’s sort of hard to find him” (1991, track 13).

“I wanna kill Sam” begins with an army recruitment procedure in which a strong voice, resembling a drill Sargent’s, claims that “the army is the only way out for a young black teenager” (track 13), followed by another voice that in a sarcastic tone comments “we do more before 7 A.M. than most niggers do in their whole lifetime” (track 13). The latter seems to be a private side-conversation that was “leaked”. Only then the rapper’s voice comes to play: “I’m comin’!, I’m comin’! I’m comin’!, I’m comin’!”. The first actual line of the rap is a straightforward “I wanna kill him, cause he tried to play me like the trick” (track 13). In conjunction with the next two lines, Ice Cube’s artistic narrative basis is enacted: “You write three verses, you write three acts. First act, you get to know the characters. Second act, you put ’em in a situation. Third act, you get ’em out of it” (WOLDU, 2008, p. 28).

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4 In Todd Boyd’s interpretation, “the violently destructive mentality of much of lower-class African American Culture” (2004, p. 333).

I wanna kill him, cause he tried to play me like the trick  
 But you see, I'm the wrong nigga to fuck with  
 I got the A to the motherfuckin' K, and it's ready to rip (Track 13)

The characters are “Sam” and the narrative voice, who proclaims that he is “the wrong nigga to fuck with”. The situation they are in is self-evident. The way to “get ‘em out of it” is not a diplomatic one. Although the narrative voice knows that finding “him” is not an easily achievable and probably impossible goal, the difficulty in locating Sam does not stop the rapper from rapping on and describing exactly what his intentions are when he finally finds “him”: “But when I do, gotta put my gat in his mouth / Pump seventeen rounds make his brains hang out” (track 13). The mere fact that Sam is not an actual person, but a symbol, should suffice to prevent listeners from proceeding to a literal reading that should not supersede the even more obvious metaphorical meaning of obstructing Sam’s mouth and hyperbolically (17 rounds) making the “brains hang out”.<sup>5</sup> The offensive is directed towards a discourse. The true target is a way of thinking that must change. This “he” unfolds himself throughout a multilayered non-corporeal *cogito ergo sum* apparatus immune to physical confrontation or the establishment of an exact identity or location and seems to get “the whole country behind him” (track 13). Considering rap’s intrinsic aesthetics and poetic resources, neither the arena in which the fight is to be fought nor the weapons can be confused with real acts of violence but rather understood as the conceptual realm and the kind of poetic creation that rap disseminates.

The reason why the narrative voice is looking forward to killing Sam is explained after an intermission in the form of a dialogue between a woman and “some man at the front door” (track 13) in which an army recruitment attempt is enacted and explicitly exposed as a predatory practice. Presenting hardly no transition between topics and timeframes, the subsequent lines powerfully condense several periods of African Americans’ historical contact with “Uncle Sam” as well as the lingering consequences of such encounters. Among many things, Sam “tried to take a motherfuckin’ chunk of the funk” (track 13). The predatory recruitment from the intermission is now narrated in detail that links the practice back to the slave traffic because Sam also came to the narrative voice’s house pretending to be friendly. However, immediately after giving a “dap”, he draws a gun, rapes the mother in the house, ties up the person that the narrative voice represents, and throws him in a “big truck [...] packed like sardines” (track 13). The truck was “full of niggas, who fell for the same scheme” (track 13), and from now on until the end of the stanza, the lyrics describes the slave traffic, the work as enslaved people, the breaking-up of families, traditions and social relations, and the assimilation into Christianity.

Differently structured from the previous one, the last stanza sets the time of the narrative in 1991. Time now is perceived chronologically from slavery to the 1990’s through memory. Having the year 1991 as a starting point the history is then told:

<sup>5</sup> Those who remember Don Quixote’s idealized damsel, who was literally a figment of his imagination based in a symbol, Dulcinea del Toboso, may see how, in a cervantine fashion, Cube transforms a symbol in a character that is sought after but never physically present in the narrative.

Now in ninety-one, he wanna tax me  
 I remember, the son of a bitch used to axe me  
 And hang me by a rope till my neck snapped  
 Now the sneaky motherfucker wanna ban rap (track 13)

Moving from real to symbolic violence, the lyrics mentions the initiatives towards censoring and banning rap due to the allegedly, which was actually a literal reading, violent and obscene content of rap music in the 1990’s. Through this “me” who tacitly claims to embody the experiences of all African Americans, Ice Cube blatantly set the irony<sup>6</sup> behind his artistic endeavor by rhyming two verses that juxtapose the attempt to ban rap and the real and largely uncensored atrocities committed against people of African descent during the slave period. A fact that even Arrested Development recognized: “Climb the trees my forefathers hung from” (track 14). Therefore, Alan Light’s commentary on Ice Cube’s first solo album, *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted*, lyrics remains truthful in the case of *Death Certificate*: “Ice Cube’s technical verbal prowess is astonishing; his razor-sharp imagery is cut up into complicated internal rhymes, then bounced over and across the beat, fluid but never predictable, like a topflight bebop soloist” (2004, p. 144).

Surely Ice Cube is making reference to every time African Americans were approached by patriotic discourse in the many occasions that military personal was in higher demand in the history of the United States. However, since the so-called Gulf War, which lasted six months (between August, 1990 and February, 1991), was the more recent historical event – behind the line “so bitch you can fight your own wars” (track 13) – that would have reached more powerfully his audience. The message is clear because before reaching the conclusion that Sam should fight his own wars, the narrative voice lists HIV-aids and narcotics as a means Sam systematically employed to keep Black people from thriving. The real violence moves to the symbolic realm when the narrative voice transits from all the listed forms of sabotage Sam has employed to the attempt to silence Black peoples’ voice through banning rap. After recognizing that there remains a “hump” yet to be overcome, in the three subsequent lines Cube works the rhymes in such a way that singles out rap music. There is one internal rhyme in the second line: “grass” and “blast”; none in the third: “rap” and “jazz” (the latter rhymes with the previous line: “jazz” and “grass”); and another internal rhyme in the fourth line: “whores and floors”.

Just wait till we get over that **hump**  
 Cause yo’ ass is **grass** cause I’m a **blast**  
 Can’t bury rap, like you buried **jazz**  
 Cause we stopped bein’ **whores**, stop doin’ **floors** (track 13, emphasis added)

The only word in a position that would permit a rhyme but that finds no phonological match is “rap”<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, not even metaphorically “Uncle Sam” can ban or bury rap because Cube claims rap’s

<sup>6</sup> The choice of an “A to the motherfuckin’ K” as the means to kill Sam is another, blatantly presented, irony that plays with Russian issued AK 47 rifle, which according to Wikipedia, “remains the most popular and widely used rifle in the world because of its reliability under harsh conditions,” in detriment of the American issued M16 and AR15, and the KKK.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are assonant rhymes.

singularity and importance within the very lyrics he composed. Such a procedure had been announced previously when the narrative voice lists, as one of the reasons for wanting to kill him, that Sam “tried to take a motherfuckin’ chunk of the funk” (track 13). The final line summarizes in one expression the reason why such a symbolic violence takes urgency. According to the narrative voice the alleged welcoming attitude of Sam has no appeal for Black people simply because the also alleged kinship that the designation “uncle” implies is not needed, nor desired nor recognized: “he ain’t my motherfuckin Uncle!” (track 13)

### “RACISTAS OTÁRIOS”

Originally part of *Racionais*’ first extended play *Holocausto Urbano*, “*Racistas otários*” also appeared in their 1994 compilation album, and a slightly different videoclip version performed by another group, DMN, can be found on YouTube.<sup>8</sup> A suspenseful beat followed by a drum and a *pandeiro*, music instruments related to *samba*, get the track started and announce the somber scenario the lyrics will discuss:

Racistas otários nos deixem em paz  
 Pois as famílias pobres não aguentam mais  
 [Racist suckers leave us alone<sup>9</sup>  
 Because poor families can’t take it anymore] (track 2)

From the very beginning, *Racionais* state unequivocally that the target of racist attacks are poor people, therefore the message is clear: Black people in São Paulo dwell in the lower social class. Linguistic clues reveal gradually the “racist suckers” identity until the moment when there is no doubt that they are law enforcement personnel who, fulfilling a higher power’s mission, frame<sup>10</sup> Black people in a daily basis in order to send them to prison. The subsequent lines, after the refrain (“racist suckers leave us alone”), resemble Ice Cube’s because *Racionais* then reflect on the long-lasting process of manipulation and marginalization that historically drives Black people to an ever-lasting state of uncertainty, which, ultimately, leads to criminality.

Only after having set the tone and the scenario through the background sounds and the rhythm the lines deliver, *Racionais* get to the point they want to get across. The rhythm is marked by an overemphasizing of most of the stressed syllables in perfect synchrony with the background beat sound. Such an attention to detail reveals from the beginning the concern with the artistic expression as a foundation for the message they want to convey. Although the system is cruel and racist, “Sociologists prefer to be impartial / and they say our dilemma is financial” (track 2), which is an old discussion and an axiomatically imposed notion that can be tracked back to the rise of the myth of racial democracy. *Racionais* challenge such a notion by embodying a “we” – in other words, the actual people who live the

8 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kExzvivYcCA>>

9 It is interesting to notice that in Portuguese both words can function as adjectives or nouns: *Racistas* and *Otários*.

10 There is a reference to the well-known “kit flagrante” which refers to illegal materials that police officers carry on them in order to claim that they are property of random Black people whenever they feel like.

attacks in a daily basis – in opposition to sociologists who coldly analyze the issue from a theoretical, detached perspective.

Mas se analisarmos bem mais você descobre  
Que negro e branco pobre se parecem mas não são iguais  
[But if we analyze it much more you find out  
That poor blacks and poor whites may resemble one another but are not the same] (track 2)

The lingering myth of racial democracy and its impact on Black people’s thought is what *Racionais* are ultimately discussing because systematically they point out throughout the lyrics the issue of lack of information, misinformation, and low level of information that keep Black people believing that any possible legacy of slavery has been eliminated by the abolition in 1888. Therefore, Black people are unable to see through the fallacy of the racial democracy and blame themselves for the predicament they find themselves in. According to *Racionais*, however,

Our reasons for fighting are still the same  
Prejudice and contempt are still the same  
We are black, we also have our ideals (track 2)

Once more, through the embodiment of a “we”, *Racionais* state explicitly that Black people are not fully integrated to Brazilian society regardless of impartial sociologists’ claims to the contrary. The fight is still active and so are the reasons to fight because “the powerful are disloyal cowards / they beat blacks on the streets for banal reasons” (track 2) At this moment the lyrics states explicitly that the “racist suckers” are not the only problem, but part of a larger and complex system of reality that lead Black people to forget the rebellions, fights and deaths of the enslaved ancestors in their quest for freedom and equality. Once again *Racionais* resort to a “we” in order to denounce that while Black people’s inaction – represented by the crossed arms in face of the ideological imposition – is deeply rooted, “they” are actively cruising the streets looking for the usual suspects whose phenotypical attributes are unequivocal.

Brazilian legislator Afonso Arinos’ proposed anti-racism bill is now 70 years old,<sup>11</sup> It is considered one of the first attempts at legally punishing racist acts and it has been overcome by more strict ones that clearly define racism as a serious crime instead of a misdemeanor. In 1990, nonetheless, it was the only available constitutional law dealing with racism. *Racionais* brought up into question the concrete lack of impact of such a regulation in the everyday lives of people of African descent. Contrasting once more the distance between the theoretical and the objective world they define it as “infallible in theory, useless in everyday life”. (track 2) Furthermore, *Racionais* plainly summarize the issue of racism in Brazil, which in theory does not exist (“they greet you”) but remains effective (“but they will shoot you from behind”). The discussion of the fissure between the theoretical and the actual

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11 <[https://www.jornaldocomercio.com/\\_conteudo/especiais/jornal\\_da\\_lei/2020/07/747205-primeira-lei-antirracismo-do-brasil-completa-70-anos.html](https://www.jornaldocomercio.com/_conteudo/especiais/jornal_da_lei/2020/07/747205-primeira-lei-antirracismo-do-brasil-completa-70-anos.html)>



everyday realm can only be achieved through art because just like James Baldwin<sup>12</sup> said, the artist is somebody that helps us see reality again. *Racionais'* aesthetic goal in “*Racistas otários*” is an attempt at making Black people see reality again by creatively elaborating on the gap between the two realms in the more approachable language and aesthetic that hip-hop music provides.

The lyrics end by repeating and reaffirming Black people's existence as Black people in a racist society but not before delivering the final and, this time, sarcastic blow on the myth of racial democracy's rationale, which claims that Brazil is a country with a suitable climate to natural racial integration where there is no racial prejudice. Such a message is delivered in a solemn, declamatory, and scholarly tone, but it is immediately interrupted, in an overlapping effect, by the worldwide famous laughter from Michael Jackson's song “Thriller”. This is not only a fine example of sampling, which “is a transgressive activity because rappers employ it to interrupt the narrative flow and musical stability of other musical texts” (DYSON, 2004b, p. 67), but also an orchestrated construction that poetically deals with form and content. That is what the sampling delivers, another level of artistic effect; because, in this case, the resource of sampling is transplanted from the realm of music into the realm of the ideological arena. What is really being interrupted is not a music but the narrative flow and speech stability of the myth of racial democracy. The laughter explicitly mocks the arrogant and fallacious content and form of scholarly discourse and language. But this part also lasts around two seconds more than the other, it is not interrupted until it is completely over – artistically claiming more importance –, and, ultimately, prepares the listener to return to the lines that have already been sung and that will be the closing remarks along with the refrain line, which is also the first and last line of the rap:

Our reasons for fighting are still the same  
Prejudice and contempt are still the same  
We are black, we also have our ideals  
Racist suckers leave us alone (track 2)

It is interesting to notice that, in their first works, while still in their earlier stage of artistic development, *Racionais* resorted to a somehow affected language that operated between everyday language and a more artificial one, which gradually disappeared in their next albums (*Sobrevivendo no Inferno* and *Nada como um dia após o outro chora agora ri depois*). The famous interview<sup>13</sup> in which they confessed that “something was off” with their language because they sounded like professors proves the sort of linguistic awareness that Dutra (2015) refers to when discussing their maturity process. Although their language was erratic they still managed to create poetic devices in accordance with rap's aesthetic proposal and at the same time, even when still applying it to some extent, they rejected and eventually were able to extirpate from their lyrics such a language, which is intrinsically alien to rap.

<sup>12</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlnDbqLNv-M>> minute 9:31.

<sup>13</sup> See also Gabriel Gutierrez Mendes' article. Focusing on the point *Racionais* want to get across (but not on the actual poetic devices they employ), Mendes interprets *Racionais'* raps as a “musical aesthetic that served as a foundation for the production of an unfriendly poetic and political discourse, combative in relation to racism and distant from reconciliations characteristics of Brazilian political culture” (p. 57-59). Needless to say, Mendes, overall, disregards the “Signifyin' mode”, especially when he attributes the qualifier “unfriendly” to *Racionais* poetics.

## “RACISTAS OTÁRIOS” AND “I WANNA KILL SAM”

Discussing the status of rappers who focused on political messages, Boyd notes that in the United States “these political rappers have not been able to link their progressive politics with the ever-changing demands of the music industry or the rap audience” (2008, p. 328). Drawing from Cornel West’s notion, Boyd concludes that “the rapper [...] is ‘simultaneously progressive and co-opted’ (1990 20)” (2004, p. 327). Therefore, for Boyd the music industry is a determinant element for the development and continuation of rap music in the United States. Such a notion would bear no relevance in Brazilian rap, especially *Racionais*, because its power has never been fully integrated into or associated with the music industry for the simple reason that afro-Brazilian rappers see the music industry as an enemy and a realm to be avoided. It is true that some rappers have been buried in the United States due to their lack of interest in complying with the ever-changing music industry and the tastes of the audience, *Racionais*, however, have always sung about topics of their choice with no regard for the expectations or demands of the music industry.

Considering only “*Racistas otários*” and “I wanna kill Sam”, I find an undisputable difference between *Racionais Mc’s* and Ice Cube’s attitudes towards the problem they discuss. The latter seems to be active while the former presents a more passive attitude. This can even be noticed in the tone and rhythm they both set for their poetic lines. Ice Cube’s is incisive and rapid while *Racionais*’ is slow and somehow reflexive. The first lines of each rap denote such a difference because while Ice Cube starts out with “I wanna kill Sam”, *Racionais* start out with “Racist suckers leave us alone”. Cube’s is evidently a representation of an “I” who is willing to act while *Racionais*’ is a request to be left alone. Cube’s is chasing (I’m lookin’...) and *Racionais* are being chased (“they cruise the streets...”). The last lines also demonstrate such a difference. Interestingly, in the videoclip, DMN’s version of “*Racistas otários*” shows a more assertive tone and a firm introductory speech by *Racionais*’ main voice, Mano Brown. A possible explanation for such a fact is that *Racionais* were still experimenting with their technique and language, which is very different in their 1997 album *Surviving in Hell* in which they are much more assertive and poetic, just like Ice Cube.

Aside from the tone and the dichotomy “chasing and being chased”, not much more is different in their lyrics. As Boyd points out, in spite of the earlier days’ “macho aesthetics”, rap’s thematic moved towards narratives of everyday life and everyday lives of Black males, in the hood, especially with the appearance of West Coast rappers. (2004, p. 326-327) “I wanna kill Sam” is not exactly a rap that deals with such narratives because the “hood” in this case is not a geographic location but an ideological one. Although “*Racistas otários*” does not quite approach the thematic, it shows that *Racionais Mc’s* were also already leaning towards poetically discussing the struggle of young black males who are born into a reality of oppression and police harassment.

Rap is a new form of knowledge as Russel Porter (1995) remarks. Rap is an insurrectionary knowledge that arises exactly where historically there has been a lack of it or, more appropriately put, an imposed absence of recognition of cultural, artistic, and intellectual practices of people of African descent as valid forms of knowledge. However, Black people have always negotiated their existence in the black Atlantic through various practices. Those who survived the passage brought with them

aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music (a mnemonic device for Bantu and Kwa tonal languages), their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical system of order, and their form of performances (GATES JR., 1989, p. 3-4).

Rap emerged from a combination of these aspects and practices amidst the intertwining of cultures and as a response to the process because, even within the attempt to erase Black people's history of knowledge, once "free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms" (Gates Jr 1989, p. xxiv). Rap is certainly one of these forms and currently the most visible of Black people's cultural expressions.

According to Tommy J. Curry,

The negotiation of human existence with the world is not simply a retreat from the world, from the failures of that world, or its tragedy; rather, this negotiation is the fundamental expression of life, the living, the contradictions of human suffering that point out that philosophy must be an existentially rooted endeavoring to make life meaningful. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we get hip-hop as the product and grammar of this particular existence. (p. xii)

Slavery and its legacies added one more and crucial element in the negotiation of people of African descent existence in this continent. Becoming "Black" and what it implies has been a fundamental expression of life for the people that such a context produced. As Dutra argues, being Black "not only refers to an intrinsic biological trait of people with African heritage perceived by others but also to the shared social and cultural practices and experiences directly related to colonial whiteness" (2019, p. 17). Such practices and experiences developed having as a starting point the aspects of the cultures of those who survived the passage brought with them and refused to forget. They are therefore not purely the original ones but "practices and experiences generated by—and developed as a response to or a side effect of—colonial whiteness's agency, regardless of how such practices and experiences were/are appropriated by society in general (DUTRA, 2019, p. 17).

In the case of *Racionais* Mc's and Ice Cube, we are lucky because their raps are a product and a grammar of Black people's existence in the United States and in Brazil. "I wanna kill Sam" is a poetically written philosophical essay on African Americans' existence not as retreated from a (white) world but as a negotiation that is fundamentally an expression of life. The track also corroborates in three levels the notion that rapping itself is one of the expressions of life that is constantly negotiated. First, as the lyrics reminds us, American society unsuccessfully worked towards banning rap after having coopted and assimilated earlier black artistic practices such as jazz, for example. Second, "I wanna kill Sam" engages in a self-aware poetic discourse that brings to the spotlight the long-lasting negotiation of their mere existence, which Black people must relentlessly endure. Just like *Racionais* rap that "our reasons to fight are still the same" (track 2), Cube calls attention to the mutual and continuing problem that Black people still face: Uncle Sam. Such a call suggests that what the lyrics is really conveying is a need to concentrate the efforts towards the actual enemy because, as H. Rap Brown (2002 [1969]) points out, it is well-known that, historically, in their negotiation of existence, self-destruction has also been a massive problem for Black people. And, within the framework of metaphorical death and rebirth that the album *Death Certificate* provides, "I wanna kill Sam" lucidly shows that "Ice Cube sees African

American’s self-destruction and the propensity toward assimilating into mainstream society, thus losing one’s identity, as the social hindrance to self-empowerment” (BOYD, 2004, p. 333).

The third level is language itself. For Dutra, “language is one, if not the main, tool in ‘the negotiation of human existence with the world.’” (2019, p. 9) In the case of people of African descent yet another layer is added because of that notion proposed by James Baldwin that a Black writer born into the English language must realize that the assumptions under which the language works are an enemy (1979). And “given that hip-hop’s problematics of race and class take place on the level of language” (Potter, 1995 p. 17), Ice Cube’s powerful lyrics, which “refreshes the language by fashioning patterned and heightened variations of everyday speech” (Bradley, 2009, p. xiii), brings such a problematic to a language-centered realm in which poetic expression becomes the chief element. Rap’s specific language has always been simultaneously its main constituent and the target of criticisms. Because rappers exercise poetically on everyday language and also because society in general “participates in a moral and political condemnation of the symbols, language, and prose Black folk use to express their lives” (CURRY, 2014, p. ix) rappers incorporate the criticism into their lyrics as a way of both dealing with them and reaffirming the importance of everyday language for the poetic construction of the lyrics. Rapper Jubwa, for instance, not only believes that standard language creates artistic limitations, but also that it produces a mindset which clouds the understanding of rap lyrics for people “that live by this language and thrive by this language” (ALIM, 2006, p. 15).

Although “*Racistas otários*” does not present the same level of maturity in the use of the language that is found in “I wanna kill Sam”, the lyrics are clearly a product of Black people’s existence and it is still able to powerfully deliver a grammar of such an existence. In comparison to their later productions, “*Racistas otários*” obviously shows that *Racionais* were still not quite comfortable with producing lyrics having solely everyday-language as the raw-material. Not only they “spell out” the words and employed element of traditional poetry while rapping,<sup>14</sup> but also, they even added beeps over curse words such as the Brazilian Portuguese version of the F-word. Another interesting point is the gradual (not entirely, though) disappearance of the word “negro” playing the role of a noun in their subsequent albums. Their still-processing linguistic awareness did not prevent them from making sure their message was delivered, nonetheless. As Derek Pardue notices, in earlier albums, such as *Holocausto Urbano*, they were invested in presenting life as a “black drama” (PARDUE, 2008, p. 111). Curiously in a later moment they launched a track called “Negro drama” which plays with the semantic implications of Brazilian Portuguese syntax. “Drama” is a noun and “Negro” can work both as a noun and an adjective. Hence, because “Negro drama” and “Drama negro” do not have the same meaning, the interchange encourages the production of different levels of meanings. If once they were invested in exposing the “drama negro”, they then moved to a discussion of the “negro drama”.

“*Racistas otários*” does not engage the issue of self-destruction – which *Racionais* Mc’s later address in another track, “*Fórmula mágica da paz*”, from a later album – but it does pave the road for future lyrics, and it is indeed an exposition of the “drama negro”. At that point in their career, the group seemed to see the negotiation of black people’s existence from a different angle. And at that point the elaboration itself of a particular artistic language was intrinsically a part of such a negotiation. The grammar of that particular existence was being built within their artistic development, hence the

14 Hyperbaton is probably the most easily found.

choice of artistically discussing the daily harassment of law enforcement agencies, the passiveness of some afro-Brazilians, and the fallacy of the myth of racial democracy, which are all a continuation of the radicalization that the dictatorial state implemented for several years. The group witnessed the so-called re-democratization process with the transition from the dictatorship to democracy in which Black people continued to experience the radicalization of the ever-lasting symbolic and real violence that the authoritarian governments revived.

#### THE ULTIMATE DRIVE BY

One of Ice Cube's strengths is his talent to explore actions of individuals and public repression while transiting amid generality and specificity (BOYD, 2004, p. 333). As the above reading of the poetic devices that he employs has shown, the construction of the lines of "I wanna kill Sam" fully exhibited such a strength. Especially when the kidnapping of the young Black teenager is enacted and magnified to represent the instances in which African Americans dealt with "Uncle Sam". *Racionais* Mc's share Cube's strength. The way they evoke the history of oppression through the language and aesthetics of rap in order to try and make the listeners see reality again is one example of such a power. Such a concern for reenacting a history that has been erased by public policies is one more connection between *Racionais* and Ice Cube. They are not the same, but, as my reading of the two lyrics has shown, "Uncle Sam" and the myth of racial democracy share a history of ideological manipulation of Black people's lives that has impacts in the symbolic and objective surroundings of people of African descent. Contemporary Black people remain negotiating their human existence because even Blackness is still negotiated with and pervaded by Uncle Sam in the United States and the myth of racial democracy in Brazil. Ice Cube's concern with history, according to Boyd, places him in a better position to challenge different cultural aspects of our own time (2004, p. 333) and so does *Racionais*'s. Poetically recreating the history of Black people's struggle to overcome the legacies of slavery in order to promote alternative histories through the most powerful of contemporary Black peoples' art forms, rap, enables the rappers to achieve their final poetic goal, to set up their ultimate "drive by".

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