

Whose School Is It?

By Linda Millik

Racism and violence in schools is a relevant and important topic that needs to be addressed by not only school faculty but also the community and the students as well. The Dead Prez, a rap duo, hoped to do just that with their song “They Schools” released in 2000. “They Schools” is full of powerful lyrics which challenge social institutions and the injustices of those institutions. Powerful implications can be drawn towards classrooms and schools across America as well as society and the larger social issues of America through examining and analyzing the lyrics of “They Schools.”

Before analyzing the lyrics of the Dead Prez it is important to know and try to understand the two men that produce those lyrics. I was first exposed to the Dead Prez on HBO’s original series Def Poetry Jam. This show was created by Russell Simmons, the hip hop mogul and owner of the Def Jam record label, Phat Farm clothing and many other urban influenced businesses. I was impressed, to say the least, by the performance of Dead Prez. I had heard of them before and knew of their militant, Malcolm X inspired take on racial issues but never knew the depth of their political awareness. After listening to what they had to say I was an immediate fan.

The group consists of two African American males who have changed their names to M-1 and Stic.man. M-1 was born in Jamaica but grew up in Brooklyn while Stic.man was born and raised in Tallahassee, Florida. The two met in 1990, after M-1 fled to Florida in the midst of a dangerous drug situation.¹ Once in Florida M-1 attended Florida A&M University (FAMU) where he got involved with the Black Panthers. M-1 would later join the National People’s

¹ <http://www.sonymusic.com/labels/loud/deadprez/deadprez.html>

Democratic Uhuru (Uhuru means freedom²) Movement which toured the nation speaking on black oppression.³ M-1 and Stic.man are both extremely politically active and aware which was one aspect of why they were drawn together. Also, both of the men saw, firsthand, the effects and reality of poverty, drugs, alcohol, oppression and social injustice throughout their lives. Rather than being discouraged by the reality they knew and saw they were inspired to make a difference and bring about change. They have said that they believe, “Our mission is to teach inspire and educate, because we need to speak the truth and respect the culture that has given birth to us.”⁴

Due to their similar outlook on life and desire to change it, they joined together to form Dead Prez and spread their knowledge and experiences. Most would assume the name of the group “Dead Prez” is short for the slang dead presidents, referring to money. However, M-1 and Stic.man are not like most rappers and overly concerned with material wealth and the dead presidents featured on paper money. The duo’s informal political education led them to choosing a name which actually represents the most endangered members of our society, leaders that are strong, true, and fair.⁵ The militant African American duo formed the Dead Prez in 1995 and released their debut album in 2000 which included the track “They Schools.”⁶

Although the Dead Prez have deeply impacted individuals and underground hip hop movements the larger musical scene has yet to truly appreciate the Dead Prez. Public Enemy was the last group to address social problem before the Dead Prez. Other current rappers such as Nas, Jadakiss, DMX, and Tupac found ways to address the problems they saw in some of their songs

² http://www.hiphop.co.za/flipside/interviews/dead_prez/

³ http://www.loud.com/home/dead_prez_story_01.html

⁴ <http://topix.net/who/dead-prez>

⁵ <http://www.sonymusic.co.uk/deadprez/biog.htm>

⁶ <http://www.rollingstone.com/deadprez>

but none were quite as blatant and crude about their distaste for the way things are and were as the Dead Prez. The current trend in hip hop is what I refer to as pop rap, a cross between pop music and rap. The Dead Prez even take this on in “They Schools” when they mention 3rd bass and the Cactus Album. 3rd bass was a rap group that had good record sales and was fairly popular but the Dead Prez were not satisfied with their lyrics that did not even scratch the surface of what was really going on in the community. This genre is not conducive to the lyrical stylings of the Dead Prez because they are not listening to rap for depth, political messages, or for their rappers to address the social problems of the era. Nevertheless the Dead Prez continue to stay true to their roots and beliefs and speak out about social injustices.

The lyrics of “They Schools” are powerful and meaningful, and they represent everything from tragedy to hope and inspiration. In fact the very title “They Schools” speaks volumes of the message of the song. Thinking back to the schools that one has attended, most people including myself refer to those schools as “my school.” However, the Dead Prez do not feel like the school they attended was truly their school but rather owned and controlled by others, who did not have their interests in mind. This belief is reinforced throughout the song. In lines three, four and five, where school is compared to social systems and institutions such as prison and even slavery all of which have oppressed African Americans.

This first stanza introduces the song and one of the main aspects of the song, oppression and racism. The fact that as a student he felt the school system was comparative to slavery exhibits the severity of the problem, even today. This theme continues in the first verse where he mentions the redneck crackers he went to school with (line 6) and the projected racism of the teachers and the material being taught (lines 13, 14, 22, and 23). The hook (line 27) also notes the racist nature of the material presented in school. Lines 56-58 and 66 again speak on

oppression and racism in our society, as it states that African Americans are being used to make profits for white men, similar to slavery.

The feeling of racism and oppression is also developed through another social conflict between African Americans and the police. The song repeatedly makes references to the police and prisons (lines 4, 17-19, 38, 48, 49, 62, 63, 68, 69). Every one of these references shows the police as unwanted, violent, racist, and oppressive. This reflects historically bad relations between police and minority groups but was most likely strongly influenced by current events within the African American community. For example the Rodney King beating where an African American male was severely and unnecessarily beaten by several white LA police officers. The LAPD had notoriously bad relations with the African American communities in their jurisdiction but the Rodney King beating was unique because it had been caught on tape for the entire nation to see. As people across the nation debated the issue of excessive force the verdict for the officers charged with the beating was anxiously awaited. The defense was granted a change of venue to a affluent overwhelmingly white suburb, as they argued they would not receive a fair trial in LA.⁷ The jury chosen from this suburb consisted of ten whites, one Hispanic, and one Asian, and not a single African American.⁸ When the verdict came back and the officers were acquitted, the people of LA reacted violently and the LA riots ensued. All of this unraveled in 1991-93. Shortly after in 1994-95 another highly publicized, racially charged event took place, the O.J. Simpson trial.⁹ From the LAPD officer, Mark Fuhrman, accused of being racist and using the “N” word to the possibility of more rioting, the racial tension raised throughout the nation. This fear and conflict was directly expressed in the song where they spoke

⁷ <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/lapd/lapd.html>

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_King

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O._J._Simpson

about the continual police presence in the school and the issue of police “murdering us and brutalizing us.”

The Dead Prez do not stop with police brutality they touch on several other social problems in their community. Teenage pregnancy, drugs, and violence are all mentioned in the first verse. Lines 16-19 discuss the presence of these social problems and their presence in the school itself. Lines 9 and 10 make reference to a nine millimeter gun which shows the first hand knowledge of and experience with a handgun of a high school student. The mention of Rikers in line 15 show the familiarity that youths have with prisons and the commonality of knowing prison life. This is echoed in lines 48-50 where the high school is compared to a prison. This comparison would not have been drawn if time in prison was not prevalent in the community and family of the artists. Lines 60-65, 67, 68, 72 deal with social problems (from crack to high school dropouts) of the entire community and the desire for school to help teach them a way to make their lives and communities better. In addition to the societal implications made by the song, there are also very strong connections and implications made for classrooms and schools.

Despite the very negative attitude directed at schools, teachers, and the school systems in general the song actually shows a lot of promise and hope for students and their schools. Even though the song repeatedly says “f***” education, they schools, and the teachers in a variety of ways it also expresses a need, desire, and love for learning. First in line eight he says “but I was reading Malcolm.” This shows the desire and love for learning because Malcolm X would not have been required reading, therefore the student went out of his way to do extra reading, enriching himself intellectually outside of school. Next he talks about taking a history class serious, front row every day (lines 11 & 12). This again shows the desire to learn which some would question with the next few lines where he accuses his teacher of being racist and happily

remembers “f***in with the teachers head.” It would be easy to label this student as no good or a trouble maker, and most likely this is what happened throughout his school experience. However this student is truly seeking more information and wants to take a more critical thinking approach to the material than simply memorizing what is in the text books. This student most likely needed to be challenged, and he was probably bored with the rote memorization of facts from the book. This is shown through lines 21-23 where he admits that he “tried to pay attention but they classes wasn’t interestin” but then goes on to demonstrate his knowledge of what was covered in class. Throughout the rest of the song the issue of importance or the priority of school is discussed. This relates to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs where quite simply certain things take precedence over others. This is why the Dead Prez continually ask the schools to help them with the social problems of the community. Without certain issues, such as poverty, crime, violence, drugs, teenage pregnancy, and so on, being addressed the students will be unlikely to focus on school. “I love education” is directly said in line 74 but the Dead Prez go on to say “f*** education...at least they s***” (lines 76&77). This shows that they truly do love and appreciate education because even when they try to write it off they can not completely, so instead they just write off “*they* s***”, meaning a white oppressive form of education. This should show every teacher that if you truly want to and try to reach your students, you can.

This song is powerful and inspirational, as it showcases the experiences and needs of an inner city minority student. Songs like this can help teachers to better appreciate and serve their students, which we should all strive for. I believe the Dead Prez truly showed the importance of making a student feel a part of the school, and proud of the school, so that the student can say that’s “My School” rather than that’s “They School”.