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Shackled by Society: Slavery, Hip Hop, and the Cultural Politics of Memory

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This research project conducts a socio-cultural analysis of contemporary hip hop to reveal the implications it has in forging a shared memory of American slavery in the 21st century. Due to its widespread influence, hip hop has served as an ideal medium for circulating discussion surrounding the evolution and historical origination of the African-American identity. The individual work of late 20th century and early 21st century artists has given rise to several historically significant lyrical and visual pieces. This project not only compares the fundamental elements of the hip hop music industry to the archetypical construct of antebellum slavery, but it also follows the chronological development of hip hop’s commemoration of plantation bondage by examining the work of individual artists via their lyrical, rhythmic, and visual production over the past 25 years. The research draws upon mostly primary sources including song lyrics and music videos and compiles them in a database. In conjunction with secondary source documentation, this database expounds that hip hop artists have used their music as a vehicle for stimulating conversation surrounding the history of black captivity and its pertinence to modern-day culture. In a broader sense, this important research study provides first of a kind scholarship on the role of contemporary music in the production of history and memory.