Common Logical Fallacies and Cultural Criticism

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Many people reject important critiques of their culture because they have problems with the *sources* of those critiques. Many people commit the genetic fallacy by assuming that because a critic exists outside one's group, that critic cannot be taken seriously. Or they will go further and commit the fallacy of poisoning the well by asserting that a person's membership or former membership in a particular group makes that person hostile and untrustworthy where criticism of another group is concerned. Others will launch *ad hominem* or personal attacks against their critics.

History is full of excellent examples of groups ignoring badly needed critiques of their culture by real and imagined outsiders. White Southerners believed that Northerners had no right to critique their way of life during the days of Jim Crow. Similarly, many White South Africans argued that Westerners had no right to criticize their ways during the days of apartheid.

On the other hand, many Black Africans have contended that non-Africans have no right to criticize negative African customs such as homophobia, sexism, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and so on. Many Arab Muslims contend that outsiders have no right to critique negative aspects of their culture such as sexism, homophobia, anti-blasphemy laws, theocracy, and so on.

In recent years, fans of hardcore hip-hop have rejected critiques of their music and subculture – especially those critiques emanating from those outside the subculture, such as older people, particularly older Whites. Fans of hardcore hip-hop accuse many of their critics of being old and out of touch, and therefore wrong. They will also accuse their critics of "hatin'," or being jealous of the success of hardcore rappers.

They will also use the common logical fallacy of the red herring by which they seek to change the subject. (Examples of their red herrings are "Hip hop is not the root cause of these problems," or "we should only be focusing on other problems such as White supremacy, police brutality, structural racism, and the huge corporations that profit from hard-core rap.")

I readily admit that my main objective where cultural criticism is concerned is not to respect or defend anyone's culture – including my own. My main goal is to critique those aspects of all cultures that help make life for many a living hell.

Hardcore hip-hop fans proudly acknowledge that their subculture is global and that their music is one of the most popular genres on the planet. Moreover, they proudly acknowledge that their subculture is largely influential in the areas of slang, fashion, dance, and so on. Yet they are very reluctant to acknowledge that their subculture also has incredibly *negative* influences.

As quietly as it's kept, some of the most trenchant criticisms of hip-hop have come from those that love it most. They have ruefully acknowledged that hardcore hip-hop glorifies pimps, gangstas, drug dealers, and so on. It denigrates women and gays and stereotypes Black people. It presents a very limited – and negative – slice of Black life, all the while proclaiming to be "keepin' it real."

Hardcore hip-hop has a profound influence upon us all. It should therefore not be surprising that we all might want to comment upon it. Why should older Black people be quiet about the negative images of Black people, young or old, that proliferate in the genre? Why should women that are not fans of the genre have nothing to say about its misogyny? Why should LGBTQI people from any background feel obligated to be silent about the genre's homophobia? This genre

influences how the world sees Black people, how the world treats women and LGBTQI people and so on. The point is not that hardcore hip-hop must be singled out to the exclusion of other problems. However, like apartheid, Jim Crow, theocracy, and other barriers to human growth, happiness and flourishing, people in the know must critique hardcore hip-hop.

Sometimes the best way to reform or save your culture is to receive critiques of it from those that are not a part of it. Some of the critics of your culture might not respect your culture. However, that does not mean they cannot offer brilliant insights into it. After all, they will not have the same blind spots regarding your culture that you are likely to have.

On the other hand, it is not usually easy to agitate and educate at the same time. It would not hurt for cultural critics to offer positive critiques of culture if and when they are warranted. It is rare – if not impossible – to find a culture or subculture totally devoid of anything positive.

In any case, we should not be first and foremost concerned about the alleged personal and political motives of our cultural critics. If they are telling the truth, we must accept the uncomfortable truth and *then* worry about why the critic decided to reveal it. (This even includes critiques that might be regarded as condescending, paternalistic or racist. Get the facts and then deal with the alleged motives of the critics.)

Finally, as the African studies scholar Maulana Karenga has noted, we must not confuse criticism with condemnation. One can be critical of a culture without trying to destroy it. Furthermore, one can critique, or even hate, hardcore hip-hop and still love Black people – including

those that are a part of the "hip-hop generation." Indeed, many of the criticisms of hardcore hip-hop spring from genuine love of Black people.