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Final Media Analysis

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By The Time I Get Back To Arizona

From the scorching streets of sun-baked Compton to the snow-covered corner stores of gritty Harlem, the rap artists of the early 90s became powerful voices for the overlooked and oppressed. These artists transcended entertainment, becoming potent spokespeople for the marginalized and disenfranchised. Their verses were more than rhymes; they were anthems, echoing the pain, resilience, and activism that defined an era. However, there was a time where I was a benign albeit ignorant cross-legged boy on the driveway, listening to my dad's old CD's as he mowed our suburban lawn. At the time, I just liked the head-nodding beat, adrenaline of 2Pac's voice, and the blistering speed of Rakkeems verses. But the words meant nothing to me. How were they supposed to mean anything to a New England, Middle-Class white kid drawing chalk stick-figures on the asphalt? The truth is, it took me far longer than I'd like to admit to truly hear the words of the artists. It wasn't until Martin Luther King Jr. Day of my 8th grade school year, my father sat me down to show me a special song for the occasion.

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Chuck D (Carlton Ridenhour) and Flavor Flav (William Drayton), of Long Island's Public Enemy, were already known for highlighting racial injustices long before my father showed me their song, "By The Time I Get to Arizona." A few years earlier, the duo released one of the most

influential hip-hop albums of all time: “It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back”. It is here where topics of systemic racism, police brutality, and the struggles faced by marginalized communities were initially exposed (Ball). Stylistically, might I add. This album garnered them critical acclaim and most importantly a fanbase, which no doubt included my father. Giving them a platform to expose future injustices around the country, bringing us swiftly to 1991 and their decision to rap about Arizona's refusal of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

In 1983, when Ronald Reagan and the federal government declared Martin Luther King Jr. Day a national holiday, Arizona was one of the last states to adopt it. They waited nearly a decade. The opposition stemmed from a mix of conservative sentiments perpetuated by Governor of Arizona at the time Evan Mecham, who canceled the holiday in 1986 (Wong). Mecham saw the holiday as a symbol of federal overreach, but others believed he and the state harbored racial biases that were manifested in a resistance to honoring a prominent African American civil rights leader. The state's political landscape played a role in delaying the acceptance of MLK Day. It took until 1992 for Arizona to officially recognize the holiday, highlighting the persistence of racial and political divides that needed overcoming to acknowledge and celebrate the legacy of Dr. King (Wong). It took massive state wide protests, the 1993 Super Bowl being moved from Phoenix, and an influential anthem released by a prevailing Rap duo from Long Island New York, Public Enemy (Walker).

"By The Time I Get to Arizona" served as my first real understanding of the idea that hip-hop is an unapologetic force for social justice. A song of resistance, sharply addressing the refusal to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the state of Arizona. The song confronts racism head-on, criticizing the state's decision as a manifestation of systemic injustice. The lyrics

delve into the concepts of othering, interpellation, stereotyping and highlighting elements of symbolic annihilation.

The lyrics of "By The Time I Get to Arizona" explicitly condemn the state's choice to reject the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, depicting it as a blatant act of racial insensitivity: "Staring' hard at the postcards, isn't it odd and unique / Seein' people smile wild in the heat? / A hundred-twenty degree, 'cause I want to be free / What's a smilin' face when the whole state's racist" (Drayton and Ridenhour, "By The Time I Get to Arizona"). Chuck D references a postcard with smiling faces and wonders how a state could perpetuate this idea of content when it is fighting racial injustice within. By doing so, Public Enemy draws attention to the deep-rooted racism that continues to permeate American institutions. Chuck D's assertive delivery and the confrontational lyrics demand accountability and change. The refusal to honor Martin Luther King Jr. is portrayed as an act of systemic racism, representing a broader pattern of discrimination and inequality.

The song underscores the need for a more inclusive and equitable society, where the contributions of African Americans are recognized and celebrated rather than marginalized. The song functions as a rallying cry against racial injustice, emphasizing the urgency of addressing systemic racism head-on. Public Enemy positions themselves as vocal advocates for change, using their music to confront the deeply ingrained prejudices that persist in American society (Frutcher). I believe it to be the song's main thematic narrative to which the rest of the ideology revolves around, unlike the next source of rhetorical potency within the song, in Public Enemies subtle but effective discourse on intersectionality.

It's important to note that Chuck D and Flavor Flav not only confront the specific issue of Arizona's refusal to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day but also delves into the concept of

"othering." Public Enemy contends that the denial of this holiday is not merely a bureaucratic decision but a deliberate act of exclusion, but also marks African Americans as an 'other' and minimizes the significance of their contributions to American history. The lyrics express a sense of frustration with a society that, by rejecting this commemoration, perpetuates a form of isolation and marginalization against African Americans.

It's also key to note how Public Enemy uses othering by using object pronouns. (i.e. us, them.) For example, in the first verse Chuck D raps: "The sucker over there, he try to keep it yesteryear / The good ol' days, the same ol' ways that kept us dyin' / Yes - you, me, myself, and I, indeed" (Drayton, Ridenhour, "By The Time I Get to Arizona"). Greg M. Smith, Professor of Media at the University of Georgia State exemplifies this process of object pronouns being used to "Other": "One of the simplest but most powerful ways of defining a group with words. If I used the word "us" as if it were clear who was being addressed: "you" the American. If you are reading this in a British or Argentinian class, you have just been subtly excluded in that paragraph" (Smith, 89). Chuck D's verses are littered with these object pronouns in order to build up this idea of Arizona and their government as being the other, whilst also othering us; Those who oppose their decision to eradicate the holiday.

Furthermore, the song addresses the issue of stereotyping, particularly through the lens of the Arizona government. The line: "Read between the lines, and then you see the lie / Politically planned, but understand, that's all she wrote / When we see the real side that hides behind the vote" (Drayton, Ridenhour, "By The Time I Get to Arizona"), underscores the selective and wrongful attention and representation afforded to different racial and ethnic groups. Public Enemy suggests that the government has inherent, negative biases towards racial minorities that contribute to the process of stereotyping, reinforcing harmful and limiting narratives. Public

Enemy uses the song as a powerful tool to resist these acts of 'othering' and stereotyping. The group challenges the prevailing narratives that marginalize African Americans and reinforces the importance of recognizing their history, achievements, and contributions to American society.

Public Enemy also offers critique that extends beyond the specific issue of Arizona's refusal to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day, delving into the concept of symbolic annihilation. The denial of a holiday honoring a civil rights icon symbolically erases and marginalizes the contributions of African Americans, perpetuating a narrative of exclusion. The lyrics of the song highlight the significance of Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy, framing the denial of his holiday as a deliberate act of symbolic annihilation. Public Enemy contends that by refusing to acknowledge King's impact, Arizona is actively erasing a crucial part of American history from the collective consciousness.

This act, according to the song, is emblematic of a broader pattern where the contributions and struggles of African Americans are ignored or marginalized in mainstream narratives. Reinforcing historical inequalities and downplaying the importance of black leaders in shaping the nation's narrative. The song becomes a powerful assertion against this form of annihilation, using music as a platform to confront and challenge the prevailing narratives that marginalize African American contributions. Public Enemy's critique resonates beyond the specific incident, becoming a broader commentary on the importance of recognizing and celebrating the achievements of black leaders to combat the historical tendency to symbolically annihilate their impact. "By The Time I Get to Arizona" thus stands as a poignant musical commentary on the enduring struggle for representation and acknowledgment in the face of symbolic annihilation.

Public Enemy's "By The Time I Get to Arizona" acts as a powerful cultural text that interpellates listeners. The lyrics of the song function as a direct call, addressing the audience and demanding their engagement with the social and political context. The act of interpellation is evident in Chuck D's confrontational delivery, where he compels the listener to confront the reality of racial injustice. The repetition of the phrase "By the time I get to Arizona" serves as a rhythmic interpellative hook, drawing the audience into the narrative and compelling them to consider the implications of Arizona's actions.

The song interpellates listeners by challenging them to question their own perspectives and assumptions. Chuck D's explicit condemnation of Arizona's decision prompts a reflection on individual beliefs and values, forcing the listener to position themselves within the discourse of racial justice. The song serves as a call to action, urging listeners to consider their role in challenging systemic racism and advocating for change. Public Enemy utilizes interpellation to disrupt passive consumption and encourage active engagement with the social issues presented in the song. By addressing the listener directly and inviting them to confront uncomfortable truths, the song becomes a transformative experience. It compels individuals to recognize their agency in the face of injustice, challenging them to become active participants in the fight against racism.

In essence, "By The Time I Get to Arizona" serves as a powerful example of how hip-hop can interpellate its audience, calling them into a critical awareness of societal injustices. The song's confrontational style and explicit critique create an environment where listeners are not mere observers but active participants in the discourse on racial inequality. Through interpellation, Public Enemy transforms the act of listening into a call for social consciousness and collective action.

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Recognizing the profound impact of hip-hop, particularly exemplified by Public Enemy's "By The Time I Get to Arizona," reflects on how naive I was to the impact of hip-hop on the politics of the disenfranchised, and an exploration of racial injustice and activism. Public Enemy is a perfect example of this artistic trailblazing. The historical context of Arizona's resistance to recognizing Martin Luther King Jr. Day underscores the deeply rooted racial biases and conservative ideologies that fueled the opposition. The song's themes of racism, othering, and symbolic annihilation are dissected, showcasing how Chuck D and Flavor Flav utilize their platform to confront societal injustices. For me, "By The Time I Get to Arizona " became a catalyst for understanding hip-hop as a force for social justice. In just over four minutes, Public Enemy encapsulates a powerful indictment of societal inequalities, making me realize its timeless call to confront and dismantle systemic oppression.

(And it's a damn good song, might I add.)

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