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Occupy Wall Street, Racial Neoliberalism, and New York's Hip-Hop Moguls

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Abstract

This article explores the responses of three New York hip-hop entrepreneurs—Russell Simmons of Def Jam, Shawn Carter (Jay Z), and Curtis Jackson (50 Cent)—to the Occupy Wall Street mobilization of 2011. Occupy protested against extreme levels of inequality, declaring that it represented the 99 percent in opposition to the 1 percent financial elite. While these moguls were all within the 1 percent ranks, seen by many as emblematic of winner-takes-all neoliberal realignment, they had none the less built star brands that represented people, in intersectional race and class terms, at the other end of the economic spectrum. This tension was negotiated in markedly different ways by the three moguls. Through these comparative cases, this article engages and assesses scholarly accounts of race, popular culture, and neoliberalism. It suggests that certain dominant frames do not leave much room to draw distinctions between the moguls'

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The Occupy movement was one of the most striking grassroots political mobilizations on the US left in recent years. It started on September 17, 2011, in New York, when protestors set up camp for the night in Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan. By late October, people had established hundreds of occupations in public places in big cities, towns, and college campuses across the United States and beyond. Occupy Wall Street (OWS), as the first New York camp became known, quickly came up with the slogan that spearheaded the mobilization: they represented the 99 percent, they declared, in opposition to the 1 percent elite.¹ These terms drew on Joseph Stiglitz's much-discussed *Vanity Fair* article of May 2011, "Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%," in which he made connections between the Arab Spring revolutions and conditions in the United States: "Americans have been watching protests against oppressive regimes that concentrate massive wealth in the hands of an elite few. Yet in our own democracy, one percent of the people take nearly a quarter of the nation's income."² In what the economist Thomas Piketty describes as "an explosion of inequality," by 2009 the wealthiest 1 percent of US households held on average 225 times the wealth of the median household.³ In its name and location, OWS most flagrantly indicted Wall Street financiers whose practices had spurred the 2008 financial collapse. But "we are the 99 percent" also brought more general trends of social injustice into focus. The movement helped establish a new discursive collectivity—albeit in terms that privileged class above other forms of oppression—of poor, working-class, and middle-class peoples.⁴ It held rearticulative power by challenging the terms of corporate-capitalist common sense, which, even after the financial crash, promoted the idea that downward redistribution and reinstating the social safety net were somehow antipopulist compared with the tax-cutting, small government rhetoric of the neoliberals and Tea Partiers.⁵

The central positions promulgated by Occupy—especially that the gap between the rich and the rest was too large—had wide public endorsement.⁶ Its supporters included artists and celebrities—nowhere more so than from



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