Ratchet

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Ratchet: it’s what Miley Cyrus was trying to be when she wagged her booty all over the stage during this summer’s Video Music Awards. Ratchet, a slang term, is loaded with nuance and entrenched in racial and feminist commentary. Ratchet first appeared in rap music in the late 90’s. Rapper Anthony Mandigo, of Shreveport, Louisiana is often credited with being the first to record a song using ratchet as slang. From here, the word took off; Mandigo’s song was later recorded by a more popular rap artist, and since has made its way into pop culture through music and other media sources (Ortved).

So what does ratchet mean? Defining it can be a little tricky, as the term has made its rounds in the spotlight; it has taken on different shades of meaning. To some, ratchet is only negative. To others, when used in a different context it can also mean something that isn’t entirely negative. Some reserve the term for women only, while others use it in a more all-encompassing way. Ratchet is used in a similar sense of words like ghetto and hood-rat, while also taking on characteristics of words like bitch and slut.

The meaning of the word ratchet diverges based on which speech community is using it. The first recorded definition of ratchet is as follows, “1. To be ghetto, real, gutter, nasty. 2. It’s whatever, bout it, etc.” (Ortved). Since this definition was written in 1999, ratchet has become a more and more widely used slang term, and as with any piece of language, it has continued to change over time. As we continue, we will explore how the use of the word ratchet has changed over time as it has taken on popular usage, and analyze how this word is used by speech communities to have both negative and positive connotations.

Most recently, the word ratchet has caught the attention of many people because of the antics of pop star Miley Cyrus. To understand what Miley, a former Disney Star, and daughter of country music singer Billy Ray Cyrus has to do with a slang term originating in southern rap scene, we must discuss her preoccupation with African American culture. Miley has been getting a lot of attention in the media for her cringe worthy quotes. Referencing her new album she said, “I want urban, I just want something that just feels Black.” (Platon). She has also had questionable performances such as in her VMA appearance this summer. Many are up in arms about Miley’s selective and flippant use of ratchet culture as cultural exploitation.
As is pointed out in a *Jezebel* article by Doadi Stewart, there is not a problem between the exchanges of ideas between cultures. In fact, this is an inherent part of what happens whenever different cultures interact with each other; however, what Cyrus is doing is appropriating the ratchet culture, her particular brand of appropriation is considered by some to be cultural exploitation. Cultural exploitation is when a dominant culture appropriates elements of a subordinated culture in a way that treats it as a resource to be mined (Rogers, 486). It is important to note that appropriation in its essence is not determined by the intentions of those involved such as Miley, but instead by the social, economic, and political environment in which they occur (Rogers, 476). This means that culture politics and power relations matter very much when discussing the phenomenon around Cyrus, as this is the primary way one can categorize cultural appropriation.

So what does Miley's portrayal of ratchet culture have to do with the overall perception of this word? A whole lot. In the 90's, a similar word to ghetto similar to ratchet became very popular. Ghetto came into the everyday lexicon, and the word hit such a peak that it could be used to describe anything from a girl's butt, to a broken blender (Bowen). Ghetto aesthetics became so visible in pop culture the girls on Sex and the City could be seen wearing ghetto inspired styles and accessories (Stewart).

Ratchet is going in the same direction; it is becoming a blanket term for, “all things associated with the linguistic, stylistic, and cultural practices, witnessed or otherwise, of poor people; specifically poor people of color, and more specifically poor women of color.” (Bowen). It is easy to be like Miley and borrow from the experiences of others, while discarding anything that may be unpleasant about it. Being ratchet is cool for play, not as a valid cultural practice from learned experience, that is the message Cyrus is sending (Stewart). Being thrust into more popular culture has turned ratchet from a nuanced term, to a blanket term, the original meaning discarded in popular culture for a more watered down, less sophisticated and offensive version of itself.

Ratchet originally appeared in a rap by artist Anthony Mandigo. His single, “Do tha Ratchet” was first released in 1999 (Ortved). When his rap was first recorded, it was not a particularly popular song. People from Mandigo’s locale of Shreveport, in northern Louisiana had heard it; its popularity did not stretch much further than that. It wasn’t until five years later in 2004 when Mandigo collaborated with rapper Lil’ Boosie to produce a new version of, “Do tha Ratchet”, that the song came into wider play (Latin Rap). This later version of the song has an accompanying music video. In the music video clubbers are filmed doing the ratchet, a dance that goes with the song. While Mandigo states he got the word ratchet from his grandmother, he does not provide details on the context (Ortved). The dance however, many people point out, is akin to the movement of that socket wrench makes (Latin Rap). In this way, the word has a double meaning. When used as a verb, it is describing a dance move. For example, “I'm not very good at doing the ratchet, could you teach me how?” This usage of the word is not in flux, when used as a verb ratchet has a very straightforward meaning. It is when ratchet is used as an adjective that things get more complex. Today, most nouns can be described as ratchet. It is the development of ratchet as an adjective that has continued to change as it passes into greater usage.
When the term was first coined, it was supposed to be a word for just getting loose, and being silly. It was used to describe mainly what people did when they go to the club; dance, drink, be high energy, let loose and have a good time (Porter). This original meaning is pretty harmless. It was just a slang word used to describe partying in a small speech community in Louisiana. Earl Williams, producer of Lil' Boosie's version of, “Do tha Ratchet” suggests that it is tied to a proud working class mentality of being real, and unapologetically what you are (Ortved). It may not have been the original intention; however ratchet came to embody of a way of life for some in working class Louisiana. Not something negative, just a way of saying, "I'm proud of what I am, I work hard to get by, now let's get stupid and let off some steam.”

Southern native, and radio host Charlamagne sees ratchet in this way. He describes being ratchet as being young, wild, and free, letting loose. Charlamagne sees ratchet as having two forms, intelligent ratchetness, and ignorant ratchetness (The Root). The difference between the two can be very subtle. Intelligent ratchetness still conveys the mentality of going hard. Ignorant ratchetness adds a level of negativity, such as a person who makes reckless or poor decisions, does things that are unsafe, or in poor taste. Filmmaker, and creator of Ratchetpiece Theatre, Issa Rae describes the difference as this, “Ratchet is a word that was intended to describe someone who is "all the way turnt up," "buck," "crunk," or "hyphy". It’s now plumbing the depths of "Hood Gone Wild" (The Root). It is this change in meaning, the turn away from intelligent ratchetness that has swung the word into a negative direction.

As ratchet left its original speech community and was introduced to a larger audience, the meaning began to change. Hurricane Chris, a local rapper from Northern Louisiana, was the first from the speech community using ratchet to reach a large audience with music using the term. Hurricane Chris was signed to a nationally known record label where he released a hit called, “Ay Bey Bey” which reached #7 on the US Billboard Hot 100 charts (The Root). This hit was released on his album 51/50 Ratchet, the remix for the song “Ay Bey Bey” is titled, “The Ratchet Remix”, and includes Lil’ Boosie as one of the collaborators. On his journey to becoming a nationally known presence on the hip-hop scene, Hurricane Chris brought the word ratchet along with him. In his remix for the song, “Ay Bey Bey” Hurricane Chris, Lil’ Boosie, and the other collaborators do a good job of representing ratchet without being negative. They merely rap about representing Shreveport, having a good time at the club, and being known in the club and hip-hop scene. After the success of this song, and Hurricane Chris, ratchet had officially arrived on the hip-hop scene, and in the lexicon of many new users.

As ratchet gained popularity in hip-hop, it became commodified. Those who used it were not longer in tune with the roots of the word, or had an understanding of how it came to be in hip-hop culture, and what that meant. The form of ratchet that came into popular use is the one described by radio host Charlamagne as ignorant ratchetness. One of the more well-known takes on this form of ratchet is a spoof music video created by Emmanuel and Phillip Hudson called, “Ratchet Girl Anthem”. In their music video for the song Emmanuel and Phillip both dress up as, “ratchet women” on the club scene and rap about the ignorant
and loose behaviors these types of women exhibit when they are out on the town (Hudson, Hudson). In their song, they describe ratchet girls as those who, “Carry outdated flip phones, go clubbing while pregnant, and try to punch other women in the face. “Ratchet is basically a lack of home training — being out in public and acting like you don’t have any sense,” (Ortved). While Emmanuel and Phillip’s song is just a parody, their descriptions bring to light the way the word ratchet is being thrown around in pop culture, and by popular artists.

Today, artists who represent the, “Ratchet Movement”, or ratchet music scene do not even always do Shreveport the honor or representing the root of ratchet. In fact, some even have begun to claim ratchet as their own word, and their own movement (Geezy). Dj Mustard, who is the producer of many club hits such as, YG’s, “B**ches Aint Shit”, and Tyga’s “Rack City” has claimed to be behind the ratchet sound. As ratchet has reached a new level of popularity, people such as DJ Mustard have been able to claim the word as their own. Those who do, don’t necessarily understand, or represent ratchet as Mandigo or Lil’ Boosie would have liked. They associated the term ratchet with pride from the place they had come from, as well as their penchant to have fun. Producers such as DJ Mustard have taken ratchet the, "Hood Gone Wild" level that filmmaker Issa Rae discusses. Mustard associated the, “ratchet movement” with artists from the west coast who are making party music (Geezy). The problem with this newer claim to the ratchet movement is not just the fact that this is not how the word was originally intended, but the fact that it has now acquired a more derogatory meaning.

Ratchet music is known today in popular culture as music that has vulgar and outrageous lyrics (Nathan). These lyrics are also often degrading towards women. The word ratchet is being used to describe things such as a woman’s genitalia, as in the Juicy J song, “Bandz That Make Her Dance”:

“She got friends, bring three, I got drugs, I got drinks
Bend it over, Juicy J gon’ poke it like wet paint
You say no to ratchet pussy; Juicy J can’t
Racks er’where, they showin’ racks, I’m throwing racks.”

-Juicy J (Prod. Mike WiLL Made-It)

In this song, rapper Juicy J is insinuating that ratchet women are attracted to a man who has drugs, booze, and money to spend at the club. This is not a very attractive portrait of a woman. Juicy J seems to realize this, stating that, “you say no to ratchet pussy; Juicy J can’t.” He sees that the appeal of ratchet women is not universal, but he finds something appealing about a woman who is attracted to and is down for a party. The song “Bandz”, by Juicy J, is a prime example of how the word ratchet has been twisted in the spotlight.

This brand of ratchetness has also been exploited on shows such as, “The Real Housewives of Atlanta”, and “Flavor of Love”. Both shows highlight behavior between women that is uncouth, baiting the women into drama for television ratings. Women in these shows have been depicted as women that do not have moral and professional compasses (Jackson). It is
these types of images that are getting the most radio and television play representing ratchet.

While ratchet may have reached a level of distaste and offensiveness in the public eye, it has not gone without notice. Movements such as writer Michaela Angela Davis’, “Bury the Ratchet” are taking a stand against this negativity towards women in the media. The aim of her campaign is to transform the ideologies that are being associated with the word ratchet (Membis). She considers herself an image activist, one who draws attention to the inequalities in image and works to correct them. Davis hopes that her campaign will spark a conversation among young women who are caught up in the ratchet image that is popular culture. Davis’ campaign seeks to reclaim the word ratchet, to highlight the success of women, rather than the negative stereotypes.

Davis’s campaign is not the only push back is popular media against the ratchet craze. Jay-Z, long time respected hip-hop artist has commented on the course ratchet has taken on his newest album, “Magna Carta Holy Grail”. In his song, “Somewhereinamerica” Jay-Z raps,

“They see I’m still putting work in
Cause somewhere in America
Miley Cyrus is still twerkin’

[Outro]
Twerk, twerk (Miley, Miley)
Only in America”
-Jay-Z

Jay-Z’s commentary may be more subtle than Davis’s Bury the Ratchet campaign, but the message is no less clear. He, as a major player on the hip-hop scene sees what is happening here. There are women, such as Miley Cyrus who are willing in ignorance to represent a negative image of women to earn money. What’s worse is the image she is appropriating is from a culture that she is uneducated about and she does not respect in her public productions. Jay-Z rarely praises white women in his music as many other on the hip-hop scene do. In this way, it is obvious to those who are familiar the hip-hop scene that he is calling out Miley and those who are like her for misrepresenting, and profiting from this bastardized version of ratchet culture (Viera).

Fame really hasn’t been good to ratchet. While it was originally just a harmless slang term in hip-hop, just as, “jiggy” was for Will Smith, popularity left ratchet with a much less attractive image. Ratchet went through many changes as it climbed to fame. Beginning in Shreveport, Louisiana, ratchet was just a term for partying hard. As the public caught hold, it came to mean so much more, a music movement, a distasteful act, or most troubling, a distasteful woman. While ratchet is no longer contained by its original speech community, at least there are some who recognize where it came from.
References


