

Hip-Hop History in the Age of Colorblindness

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Twenty years ago, Tricia Rose published her influential monograph *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*.¹ The book's sharp cultural analysis and impassioned defense of rap's musical worldview made it required reading for scholars and teachers of US popular culture. The "noise" in Rose's title had multiple referents: the white majority dismissing the music as such; the hip-hop community celebrating its ability to interfere with the status quo; the creative, non-traditional approaches to music-making adopted by its producers. Researched and written in the late 1980s and early 1990s, just as rock and popular music surveys were becoming common on college campuses throughout the country, Rose's portrayal of rap as rebellious, politically engaged, and aesthetically daring quickly became the standard view of hip-hop in "rock-centered" popular music texts and survey courses.² However, in the past two decades, the genre has undergone a remarkable transformation, moving from the margins of US society to its center. In fact, most current undergraduates have always lived in a world with rap music in the Top 40.³ Today, hip-hop's reach extends far beyond the recording industry, helping to market a variety of products and brand them with the aura of urban cool.⁴

As music-centered departments come to include hip-hop-related research, teaching, and programming as a part of their overall missions, convincing

1. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

2. For a critique of "rock-centered" historiography in popular music history, see David Blake's introduction to this current volume.

3. Rap music is one element of hip-hop culture, which includes other elements such as b-boying, graffiti, and DJing. In the 1980s, "rap" was the term used most widely in the music industry, but since the early 1990s, "hip-hop" has displaced "rap" as the genre's name. To distinguish the commercial genre from the culture that inspired it, I use the terms "rap music" and "hip-hop music" interchangeably, but I use "hip-hop" alone to describe the culture more broadly.

4. As the genre has expanded its fan base, rappers have leveraged their star power to advertise and brand a variety of products. One of the most successful partnerships has been record executive Jimmy Iovine and rapper/producer Dr. Dre's company Beats by Dre, whose headphones have captured a majority of the youth market. In May of 2014, Apple announced that it would acquire Beats, making Dr. Dre hip-hop's first billionaire.

colleagues and administrators of the legitimacy and value of the music is ceasing to be a primary concern.⁵ In fact, instructors capable of offering courses on hip-hop and rap music often find themselves valued for their ability to connect with diverse undergraduate populations and to help generate coveted “student credit hours” (my current institution’s euphemism for tuition dollars). However, before we can celebrate hip-hop and rap music’s arrival on our syllabi, some serious issues need to be addressed. Of primary importance, ironically, is hip-hop’s success.

As a central component of mainstream US culture, much rap music is now under the purview of large multinational companies. Many artists and fans worry that corporate control has led to music that is less explicitly political and more focused on certain problematic, stereotypical portrayals of blackness. Tricia Rose herself has recently called into question some of the conclusions she reaches in *Black Noise*, fearing that hip-hop music’s supporters too often turn a blind eye to the misogyny, sexism, and racist caricature embedded in the genre.⁶ In the 1980s, Chuck D once called rap music “black America’s CNN.” There are signs today, however, that we need to be more skeptical than ever about information produced by the genre.

Allow me to illustrate what I mean with reference to a remarkable scene in Byron Hurt’s 2006 documentary *Hip hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*.⁷ About forty minutes into the film, Hurt confronts a group of aspiring African American rappers. Initially assuming that he is with a record company, the MCs take turns reciting rhymes for his cameras. Their verses, which are full of misogynistic and violent imagery, underscore the documentary’s concern with rap music’s problematic content. In fact, Hurt interrupts the impromptu performance to make the following statement: “Everywhere I go, and I’ve been shooting this documentary for two years now, and every time I have kids spit [recite lyrics] for me, it’s all about the same thing. It’s all about how you’re going to kill somebody, how you’re going to rape somebody.” After realizing that Hurt is no talent scout, the

5. There are many signs that the music is not only being taught widely, but that its presence in the academy is stronger than ever. Just a few examples include the University of Arizona, which offers an Africana Studies Minor with a Concentration in Hip-Hop Cultures (<http://africana.arizona.edu/news-events/announcing-new-minor-africana-studies-concentration-hip-hop-cultures-u>); Pioneering hip-hop DJ Afrika Bambaataa, two years into his term as visiting professor at Cornell University, whose hip-hop Collection boasts an archive of rare materials from hip-hop’s formative years (http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/hiphop/bambaataa_vs.html); and Harvard University, which now offers the Nasir Jones Fellowship, an annual hip-hop research award named after rapper Nas (<http://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/announcing-nasir-jones-hiphop-fellowship>).

6. Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008).

7. Byron Hurt, dir. *Hip hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (Media Education Foundation DVD 223, 2006).

aspiring rappers change gears, engaging him in a dialogue about racial representation and the rap music industry. They explain that the music industry does not seem interested in so-called positive lyrics and that they believe they need to style themselves as “gangstas” in order to get a record deal.

This conversation is followed by cultural critics, musicians, and record executives who explain how, since the 1990s, the music industry has narrowed its focus and concentrated on promoting gangsta rap artists because they deem them to be the most profitable. Just after this segment, Hurt shifts to an interview he conducted with a group of suburban white teenagers, a demographic responsible for the majority of rap purchases. One teen earnestly explains that she and her peers value hip-hop music because it gives them a window into an unfamiliar world. In short, it supposedly teaches young white kids what life in black communities is like. Coming just after the testimony of multiple artists and cultural critics emphasizing just how distorted rap’s picture of blackness is, this scene delivers quite a blow.

I show this segment of Hurt’s documentary each year to provide students with an entry point to reflect on their own relationships to racially stereotyped entertainment. As *Beyond Beats and Rhymes* makes clear, white executives at large media conglomerates are now the main beneficiaries of gangsta rap. And white consumers—who make up the majority of the rap music buying population—must have a profound investment in these representations of blackness for rap music to be profitable. Many white fans claim hip-hop as “their” style, but they do not have to live with the consequences of being stereotyped as “thugs” or “hos.” They can partake in the music or fashion of the hip-hop industry without worrying that they will be targeted and killed.⁸ As hip-hop historian Jeff Chang explains in a recent interview, the mainstreaming of black cool may have changed the look and sound of mass culture, but it has not done much to stop ongoing racial injustice:

Just because I buy these headphones because all of these black artists are saying I should, doesn’t make me any more knowledgeable about black struggle or anti-blackness . . . You open the door to a potential discussion here, but you foreclose the opportunity because it all becomes transactional. There’s no exchange except for a transactional exchange. This cultural desegregation we see in our images is often mistaken for “well, we’re all good now. We’re out in space beyond race.”⁹

8. The tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Jonathan Ferrell, to name only a few recent cases, illustrate the dangers of racial stereotyping and anti-black prejudice.

9. Kelsey McKinney, “Does the Dr. Dre–Apple Deal Mean That Hip Hop Is Selling Out?,” *Vox*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.vox.com/2014/6/3/5775630/does-the-dr-dre-apple-deal-mean-hip-hop-is-selling-out>.

Teaching at a public research university in the Pacific Northwest whose student body is eighty percent white, I am keenly aware that my students' engagement with hip-hop music does not necessarily translate into greater involvement with or knowledge about the realities facing black communities. Rap music continues to cross lines of race, class, and nation, and millions of people care about it deeply. But like professional sports, rap music is a cultural arena in which the most prominent actors are black even though the majority of its spectators are not. As I write this essay in the aftermath of the police killing of Mike Brown, an unarmed, eighteen-year old African American man in Ferguson, Missouri, I am reminded of how divided the US is when it comes to questions of race. Despite the recent success of white artists, such as Iggy Azalea and Macklemore, listeners still perceive rap as a "black" genre, and it is important that hip-hop history courses devote significant time and energy to teaching students about the black struggle and legacy of racism behind the images they consume.

Although I share some critiques of rap music's exaggerated and narrow portrayals of black identity, such as those in Hurt's film, I do not see my classroom as a place to dictate what songs and artists are or are not "authentic." Instead, I attempt to unpack the genre's fascination with outlaw figures. True, the most popular music of last two decades has indulged in a fair amount of racial fantasy, but there is a very real political context behind rap's fascination with power, domination, and criminality. Although songs detailing drug dealing and violent episodes are most often performed from a first-person perspective, they are only truly intelligible when one grasps the weight of circumstances beyond the control of any one individual.¹⁰ Despite the many politicians and pundits promoting "colorblind" social policies, life in early twenty-first century America continues to be defined by racial inequality.¹¹ One set of issues central to understanding hip-hop and rap music is the War on Drugs and the growth of the prison-industrial complex. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing through to the present day, anti-drug laws and aggressive policing have targeted inner city communities. For example, although crack and powder cocaine are chemically identical, media and law enforcement first focused on crack, which was more prevalent in low-income, black communities where the underground

10. The best writing on gangsta rap has always approached the music in this way. Robin D. G. Kelley and Eithne Quinn's work on gangsta rap, for example, interprets the genre as a sophisticated cultural hustle that transforms stereotypes about black people and inner city neighborhoods into profits. See Robin D. G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics," *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) and Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' But a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

11. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

economy had filled the void created by deindustrialization. Each year, a majority of my students are amazed to learn that beginning in 1986 and continuing until 2010, federal law mandated that crimes related to crack cocaine be punished at a rate one hundred times greater than that for powder cocaine.¹² Even marijuana, which is consumed with virtual impunity on mostly white college campuses across the country, has been aggressively policed in inner city areas. A recent report by the ACLU shows that black Americans are almost four times as likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than their white counterparts, even though both groups consume the drug at similar rates.¹³ As a result, one in every fifteen African American males eighteen years of age or older is incarcerated in US prisons.¹⁴

The challenge in music history courses is to combine such sociological perspectives with the exploration of what should be an obvious fact: hip-hop and rap music is music. Focusing attention on hip-hop as art cultivates an appreciation for the dedication, skill, and humanity of its practitioners. Music is not just a proxy for political and social issues; it is a pleasurable activity that requires hard work and training, and hip-hop musicians deserve the same treatment as artists that we are accustomed to granting composers and singer-songwriters in other musical genres. History courses on other types of music often require students to memorize particular forms or chord progressions. Hip-hop history courses can invite students to chart the rhyme schemes and rhythmic flow of particular verses, to analyze the way producers chop and loop various samples to create backing tracks, and to turn their attention to the methods of hip-hop DJs and dancers whose musical innovations laid the foundation for rap.¹⁵ Although we often find rap music at the center of debates about racial inequal-

12. In other words, someone in possession of 1 gram of crack cocaine would receive the same sentence as someone caught with 100 grams of powder cocaine. For more information about the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 95–136.

13. “The War On Marijuana in Black and White,” American Civil Liberties Union, accessed June 14, 2014, <https://www.aclu.org/billions-dollars-wasted-racially-biased-arrests>.

14. “Combating Mass Incarceration: The Facts,” American Civil Liberties Union, June 17 2011, <https://www.aclu.org/combating-mass-incarceration-facts-0>.

15. Fortunately there are a variety of sources that model such engagement with the culture and artistry of hip-hop practitioners. On the poetics and rhythm of rap’s lyrical flow, see Kyle Adams, “Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap,” *Music Theory Online* 14, no. 2 (May 2008), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.08.14.2/mto.08.14.2.adams.html>; Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2009); and Paul Edwards, *How To Rap: The Art and Science of the Hip hop MC* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009). On beat making, see Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005); on hip-hop DJing, see Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and on dance, see Joseph Schloss, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

ity and representation, it is important to avoid reducing artistic practices and the experiences of musicians and listeners to racial politics. Writing by Joseph Schloss and Mark Katz, in particular, have helped me and my students focus attention on the aesthetic values and skills required for hip-hop musicians to do what they do.

Thinking more about hip-hop as artistic process enables class discussions that are richer, more nuanced, and humanistic. For example, I might begin a course by playing Wu Tang Clan's "C.R.E.A.M." (Cash Rules Everything Around Me), a song about the experiences of young drug dealers on the streets of New York. After an initial discussion of the song's content and musical track, composed from a brief piano loop taken from The Charmels "As Long As I've Got You" (1967), I might turn to the history of the War on Drugs and its impact on inner city communities.¹⁶ Then, I ask the students to look more closely at the lyrics and rhythmic flow of rappers Raekwon and Inspectah Deck. Both verses feature intricate word play and internal rhyme, which allow me to emphasize that, despite being about life in a Staten Island ghetto at the height of the crack era, the song is no straightforward reflection of reality. Highly stylized in terms of sounds, word choice, and rhythm, the song's effectiveness and power lies in its ability to fashion a world of its own, crafting music and poetry from the difficult circumstances they and others in their community face. To follow, I ask students a number of open-ended questions: What is the song's message? Is it a celebration of money's power? A critique of capitalism? Or a simple acknowledgment of the way things are? Why are songs like this one popular with white audiences far removed from the realities they describe?¹⁷ After this discussion, I play the song a final time to give students another chance to listen and report back about how their opinions and ideas may have changed.

In conclusion, a critical pedagogy for hip-hop and rap music history can cultivate pride in black artistry while historicizing and "denaturalizing" the images of blackness that circulate in rap songs. Written at a time when the music was more marginal in US society than it is today, early hip-hop studies and popular music texts focused on the political and resistant aspects of rap. More recent developments suggest that we need to revise views that cast rap music as an embattled and oppositional cultural form. As a major force in the recording and advertising industry, hip-hop's sounds and images are everywhere and are used to brand products from sports drinks to deodorant. It is crucial for history courses to challenge students to think historically about the music and

16. RZA of the Wu Tang Clan is one of the featured artists in VH-1's documentary *Planet Rock: The Story of Hip Hop and the Crack Generation*. The film does an excellent job of exploring the racial dimensions of the War on Drugs.

17. Responses to these questions vary, and the unpredictability of such conversations is what I value the most about them.

the wider world in which it is produced. In addition to covering influential and popular songs, hip-hop histories should also explore ongoing issues of racial inequality that inform them. At the same time, teachers and administrators can support efforts that bring hip-hop onto campus as an artistic practice. Courses on rap music history are becoming fairly commonplace, but fewer schools and departments of music offer students the opportunities and resources necessary to engage the music as musicians. The ubiquity of hip-hop in today's culture and the familiarity that current students feel with the music present us with an opportunity. But before we can declare that "we're all good now," we need to make sure our pedagogical approaches encourage students to question their relationship to the music and the images of race that circulate within it.