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Black Noise:

Youth, Music, and Cultural Politics

Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America

University of New England Press, 2001


BY Rinaldo Walcott

Youth culture has been one of the driving forces that has kept cultural studies going with integrity since the crisis in the humanities began to set itself out by other creating cultural studies programs, streams and centers or hiring persons qualified to "teach and research" in the area, or should we say "raps"? In the last ten to fifteen years a number of texts have been produced that examine and theorize the multiple and conflicting elements of popular culture. In many of these texts youth culture has been either the explicit site of interest, study and interrogation or they have been thrust into the "life" theory of "resistance," "transgression, "play, "postmodernism," etc., that have come to populate our vocabularies in an effort to name cultural practices and artifacts.

Rap music and hip hop culture have emerged together as one of those popular cultural "sites" that many academics and cultural critics (myself included) have begun to cast their nets around. Houston Baker (1993) in Black Studies: Rap and the Academy, argues that rap is a black sound that can no longer be ignored by the academy. He makes a strong case in a book that for why the study of rap holds the promise for an invigorated black studies in the twenty-first century. While Baker’s book does not delimit what on what promise might look like, along comes Tricia Rose’s Black Noise, bringing the youthful noise of what rap and thus hip hop culture means for the here and now, as well as for a Black future.

Rose’s Black Noise is a solid and convincing analysis of hip hop’s importance to contemporary cultural debates, studies and innovations. Black Noise presents a space that is knowledgeably informed by hip hop culture, while at the same time it critiques and articulates a politics of possibilities that does not romanticize rap as hold-all promises for black empowerment. Right from the beginning of the text Rose lays out her continuing engagement with the rap "hopper." Not only has she listened to raps but the text was the music she grew up with. She conducted a fascinating interview with the rapper, producer, manager, technical poet.

Border/Lines
The funkeiros dance for the revolution.

Andrew Ross, on the solicited jockstrap c-cop, in quoted as saying, "No more nose-headed talk about rap and hip hop! From now on, all discussion starts here with Black Noise, a crucial book about a culture that has become a social movement. Ross seems to have his analysis backfires on this one. Rap is a social movement that has become a "culture." Ross’s praise for Ross’s work, while noting the need to read in the context of promotional campaigns, in a clear example of the ways in which some academics and cultural critics continue to struggle with the question of nationalism and ethnicity. David Tropp’s classic Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop (1984) and even some of Ross’s homely Greg Tate’s writings on rap and hip hop culture might be considered as the places where "all discussion starts" as hip and hip hop culture.

While Ross has written a fine and well-researched text, a bold and unvarnished move to immediately "categorize" the text in the annals of cultural studies would be a bit overwhelming. But in the collection of essays that Ross and Ross edit, this process is clearly underway, with numerous references to her text or articles and the fact that this is in fact an example of what seems to be a white middle-class feminist will always hold sway over the theoretical, conceptual and definitional aspects of feminism. Ross does not object to such positions strongly enough. Instead she offers us her definition of feminism, which MC Lyte finds appealing, as an attempt to demonstrate that women rap artists do not have a fear of a feminist planet.

Ross’s text fills in a number of spaces that have been left open. In this sense, the book has begun to attract serious attention. Often I wished that she would discuss questions of pleasure, desire, articulated politics and the identifications that the politics suggest, but I guess that is another project.

"The Ran and the Hip Hop!"

dances, insurance company reps, etc., and she transcribed numerous songs as a part of the research for her book. We can attest to after stroking her back to get her in that the manufacturing noise was not needed—it is pretty clear that Ross is a member of that fluid community scene called the Hip Hop Nation.

Sampling is a number of rap artists’ work to produce a text that moves through a number of the major issues that have confronted the academic study of rap to date. Ross often produces some very interesting breaks. Some of the most interesting of these riff for me are her discussions of rap and technology, insurance companies, and women rappers and feminism. What those three discussions offer is the history of rap music and hip hop culture as it has evolved from its roots in the black insurrection youth shifted and reinforced the use of the sampler, the drum machine, and even outdated mixing boards and other types of equipment to produce songs that sold millions to shake night.

She further demonstrates how black oral practices have been brought to technol-

ogy and that this creative and articulate interplay has occurred. She makes clear that rap is a much more complex medium than the homosocial andahi brute force technology. Ross writes, drawing on Walter Ong, that the concept of postindustrial society merges orally influenced traditions that are created and embodied in a postindustrial, technologically sophisticated cultural context. Postindustrial society describes the way oral traditions are revised and represented in technologically sophisticated cultural context. It also has the capacity to polymerize. "Literarism" is a technology that is used to articulate sounds, images and practices associated with orally based forms, so that "literarily" new and "techno-

ology and technologies orally, (p.56)

Rosen’s entire argument debunk the myth that rap is not really music. She posits an explicit argument, in a very rap fashion, that challenges Rosen’s claim that black music has not been a more creative musical expression today. As well,Black Noise disrupts the
An interesting one, Decker's project does not address the overall problematic of a nationalism but instead focuses on the "language of nation to nationalise a history of social oppression and struggle which can emancipate the movement toward black empowerment and independence." It would contend that the struggle for nation and race as a conceptual tool continues to produce a disabled politics of incommensurability and domination, and thus Decker's argument is in a weak position.

After dealing with the politics of the "boys," Decker turns to the music and videos of Qays Lafitah to recuperate any moment of possibilities in what he terms nationalist rap. Decker wants to hold to the discourse of nation, but by looking at Lafitah he is forced to jettison nation in favour of a diasporic gathering—a fluidity of bodies. I would contend, however, that Lafitah's rap—especially "Ladies First"—denies nation as we know it in relation to his nationalism. Instead Lafitah's music is diasporic, or what Paul Gilroy calls a "black Atlantic." It deals with the Love from England raps on the same album and specific song and Winner Mandela's image in the video—apoint to questions that exist beyond the strict confines of nation to address the more interesting and complex realities of transnational subjectivities. The development of the historical references, practices, aversions, and duties that the last rap evokes.

The diaspora is further explored in George Yule's "The Federation of Riya." Yule writes the words of the following in which subaltern youth in Brazil have begun to disrupt and challenge the mythic idea of racial harmony in Brazil through the use of their cultural traditions. The funkons, a popular form of plasticity and dance the revolution. Their music reflects the social unrest and "the ways in which they acquire African musical circum-

The Transparency of Fiji is familiar, it addresses the above question. He is not breaking any new thematic ground for himself here when he argues that progressive movements, constrained to domesticate and interpret the meaningfulness behind social relationships, intentionally or by accident by emptying the social of meaningfulness. Now he seeks to show that a sort of inter-

None of these strange characteristics that inhabit Baudrillard's universe has an Other: they are only points in a network of disembodied circulation.