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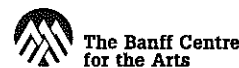
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“Yeh Ho”

Youth, Music and Cultural Politics

Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994.
Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (eds.), *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

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 sort itself out by either creating cultural studies programs, streams and centres or hiring persons qualified to “teach and research” in the area, or should we say arena.... 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 those texts youth cultures have been either the explicit site of interest, study and interrogation or they have lain beneath the “tidy” theories of “resistance,” “hegemony,” “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 weak book 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 deliver on what that promise might look like, along comes Tricia Rose's *Black Noise*, bringing the joyful 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* traverses a space that is knowledgeable of rap and hip hop culture, while at the same time it critiques and articulates a politics of possibilities that does not romanticize rap as hold-all promise for black emancipation. Right from the beginning of the text Rose lays out her credibility as a hip hopper. Not only has she listened to rap for many years, but it was the music she grew up with. She conducted numerous interviews with rappers, producers, managers, technical people,

dancers, insurance company reps, etc., and she transcribed numerous songs as a part of the research for her book. All I can attest to after reading her book is that the authenticating move was not needed—it is pretty clear that Rose is a member of that fluid community some call the Hip Hop Nation. Sampling 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. Rose often produces some very interesting breaks. Some of the most interesting of those riffs 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 never been told before. Rose tells how black inner-city youth shifted and reinvented the use of the sampler, the drum machine and even outdated mixing boards and other types of equipment to produce songs that caused millions to shake nightly. She further demonstrates how black oral practices have been brought to technology and that a useful and articulate interplay has occurred. She makes clear that rap is a much more complex medium accompanied and enhanced by “new” technology. Rose writes, drawing on Walter Ong, that

[t]he concept of postliterate orality merges orally influenced traditions that are created and embedded in a postliterate, technologically sophisticated cultural context. Postliterate orality describes the way oral traditions are revised and represented in technologically sophisticated cultural context. It also has the capacity to explain the way literate-based technology is made to articulate sounds, images and practices associated with orally based forms, so that rap simultaneously makes technology oral and technologizes orality. (p.86)

Rose’s entire argument debunks the myth that rap is not really music. She posits an explicit argument, in a very rap fashion, that challenges musicologists to find a more creative musical expression today. As well, *Black Noise* disrupts the

notion that rap is a form that merely capitalizes on recognizable music, as M. Elizabeth Blair suggested in an article in the *Journal of Popular Culture* (1993). Rap’s use of technology and the insight that one can glean from tales of technological innovation suggest that technology is not the beast that current naysayers of the “information highway” would have us believe. Instead Rose and the Hip Hop Nation’s encounter with technology has made class, gender and racial differences important variants to be discussed and sorted out in any understanding of, and access to technology. But what is apparent is that when subaltern hands get hold of technology we are left shouting, “Hip hop hooray!”

Rose demonstrates the processes of racism in the music industry in a very interesting way. By locating and analyzing the importance of the insurance industry to rap music, Rose begins to demonstrate how shifting notions of blackness have impacted on one of the most important aspects of rap music. By restricting policies to either arena owners or booking companies, insurance companies have been able to circumvent the more immediate political practices of some rap artists. If Parliament and Congress are the places where mainstream politicians strut their stuff, then the arena is the place where rap artists articulate their visions of a “new world order.”

Black Noise makes clear that insurance companies play an instrumental role in popular cultural dissemination, and on that note Rose has unearthed an important consideration for future studies of popular culture. Her descriptions of “security” at rap concerts demonstrates the ways in which the large arenas mirror the practices of some trendy night-clubs, which attempt to keep black folks out. While at the concerts the “security search for knives and guns, at the clubs notices that announce no jeans, baseball caps or running shoes seem to scream no black guys!”—since that is the dress code in full effect for many of us today. Rose’s analysis and information makes those links clear and demonstrates the continuum between club practices, and arena practices implicating insurance companies all the way. The processes to continually keep out black

folk are excavated in this archeology that positions insurance companies in the “conspiracy” to destroy rap’s political possibilities by limiting rap artists access to their public in “person” to somewhere between the Walkman and Discman.

It is when Rose addresses the relationship between female rappers and feminism that her position and analysis begins to falter a bit. While I think she makes a strong case for why some women rappers might not want to be named as feminist, I think that Rose often comes off as an apologist for female rap artists who do not always want to engage a politics that demands the condemnation of sexist “brothers.” While it must be made clear that Rose’s analysis throughout her text is situated as a cultural studies feminist reading, her too easy release for “sisters” who refuse the naming is an indication that not all is on the up and up. If naming practices are an important part of new world black cultures—and we know how important they are—and we also know that naming is important to rap artists—look at the names that various groups use to identify themselves—it is then of political importance to continually pursue the question of naming.

Women rappers who articulate a song that places an emphasis on resisting sexist racism have a political obligation to sound off the word “feminist.” As bell hooks has noted in her essay “Black Women and Feminism,” (1988) black women (and men) need to take responsibility for feminist praxis and name the politics of which they are a part. Women rappers’ “resistance” to the word/name “feminist” seems to continue a notion of victimhood that suggests that white middle-class feminists will always hold sway over the theoretical, conceptual and definitional apparatus of feminism. Rose does not object to such positions strongly enough. Instead she offers us her definition of feminism, which MC Lyte finds agreeable, as an attempt to demonstrate that women rap artists do not have a fear of a feminist planet.

Rose’s text fills in a number of spaces that have been left gaping wide ever since rap has begun to receive 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.

“designed to address audiences reached by mainstream music journalism and fans of any musical taste.” Instead the essays generally read like a lament for the 1960s.

analysis of the various ways in which political organizing is currently accomplished (via letter-writing campaigns, persistent demonstrations, talk TV, talk radio, reli-

The *funkeiros* dance for the revolution.

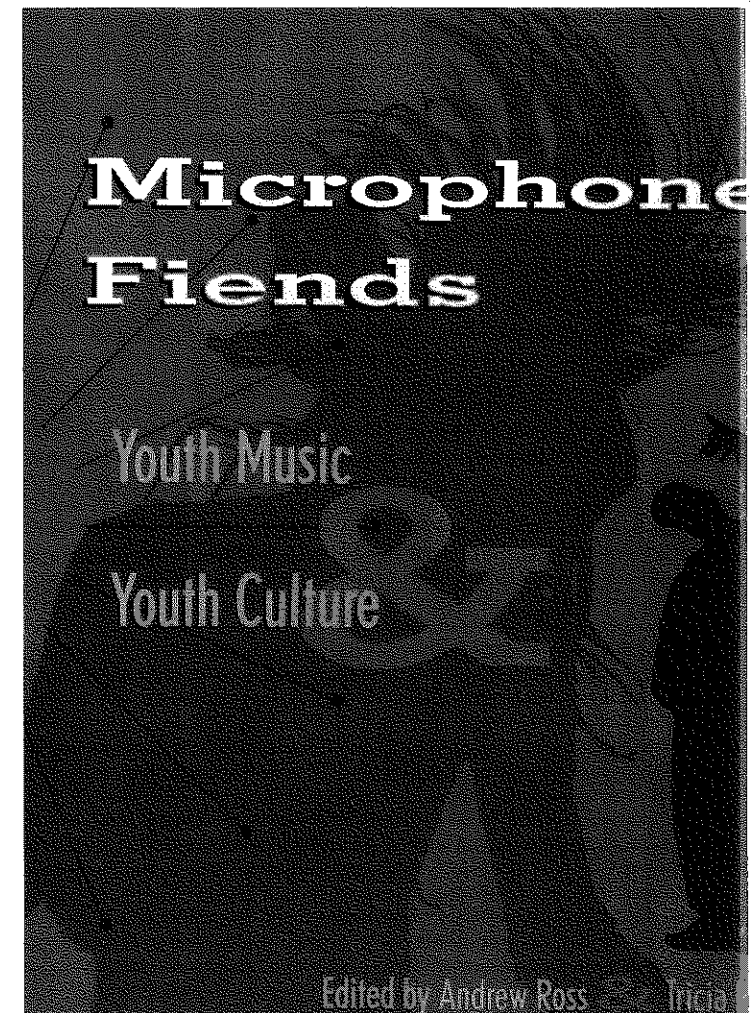
Andrew Ross, on the solicited jacket copy, is quoted as saying, “No more loose-headed talk about rap and hip hop! From now on, all discussion starts here with *Black Noise*, a crucial book about a culture that has become a social movement.” Ross seems to have his analysis backwards on this one. Rap music is a social movement that has become a “culture.” Ross’s praise for Rose’s text, while needing to read in the context of promotional campaigns, is a clear example of the ways in which some academics and cultural critics continually attempt to unwrite other historical moments and events. David Troop’s classic *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (1984) and even some of Rose’s homeboy Greg Tate’s writings on rap and hip hop culture might be considered as the places where “all discussion starts” on rap and hip hop culture.

While Rose has written a fine and unashamed move to immediately “canonize” the text in the annals of cultural studies would be a bit overwhelming. But in the collection of essays that Ross and Rose edit, that process is clearly underway, with numerous references to her text or articles and talks that became a part of the revised text. *Microphone Fiends* is a collection of essays from a conference organized to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the American Studies Program at Princeton.

Ross’s introduction to *Microphone Fiends* is a garbled analysis of youth culture that attempts to deal with everything while really addressing nothing. To go from *Black Noise* to *Microphone Fiends* is a major comedown. *Microphone Fiends* promises to be an “accessible” text

In the essay “We Know What Time It Is: Race, Class and Youth Culture in the Nineties,” George Lipsitz argues that to understand “young people today, we have to acknowledge the new realities that confront them, and we have to reject analyses of youth that rely on outdated and obsolete concepts” (17) as an attempt to critique arguments that position understandings of youth culture in relationship to 1960s nostalgia. Yet by the end of his article, he lapses into the following: “[w]ithout some kind of collective political movement attempting to redistribute wealth and power, youth culture may well degenerate into simply another way for capitalists to sell back to people a picture of the life that has been stolen from them” (26). At first blaming youth culture for what appears to be a lack of large-scale political culture, Lipsitz realizes his mistake quickly enough to add the sentence “[y]et it would be foolish to dismiss youth culture simply because it has not yet produced an organized political movement” (26).

Lipsitz’s essay bespeaks the very moment of nostalgia that he earlier attempted to cast aside as problematic. His desire to see youth culture produce large-scale political organization lacks an



gious programs, etc.)—mainly by the Right who seem to have mastered political organization. Youth have very little access to those kinds of organizational tools and the disarray of Left politics in North America leaves little for politically progressive youth to identify with. I am also struck that Lipsitz’s partial celebration of youth culture

does not address the conservatism that exists among many young people. To address that conservatism one must be willing to live with contradiction, recognizing that aspects of popular youth culture are not necessarily counter-hegemonic.

If we were to follow Lipsitz's argument we might end up thinking that hip hop culture is youth culture today. While it is true that hip hop culture carries much sway, care should be taken not to produce narratives of youth culture that place hip hop culture as overdetermining youth culture. Discourse around Gen Xers, Slackers and grunge rockers are mainly concerned with young white male youth who seem to be lamenting that they will never wield the same kind of power to organize the lives of others as their daddies did and still do.

Many of the essays in *Microphone Fiends* use rap as the point of departure to address youth culture today. While rap as artform and hip hop as cultural practice/lifestyle have been an articulation of the urban black subaltern hipster with profound effects for popular culture generally, many youth in various corners resist what they see as the taint of blackness, exhibiting the symptoms of fear of a black planet. Rap's power as an articulate form that forces onto the agenda questions of a political nature, does not mean that rap is droppin' science for all.

In another essay that works with rap as its analytical base, "The State of Rap: Time and Place in Hip Hop Nationalism," Jeffrey Louis Decker argues that two different forms of nationalism exist in rap music. He identifies those forms as 1) a nationalism that harkens back to black nationalism of the 1960s and appropriates the images of folks like Malcolm X, Angela Davis and so on, as exemplified by Public Enemy, and 2) a nationalism that is Afrocentric and sees Africa as the base through which its politics will ultimately be expressed, as exemplified by X Clan.

Decker analyzes the lyrics of P.E. and X Clan to demonstrate how the two groups differ in articulated political influences. Yet his analysis demonstrates that eventually both groups produce a kind of sexism that places women in very proscribed, restricted and limited positions. While his exercise is

an interesting one, Decker's project does not address the overall problematic of a nationalist politics but instead focuses on "the language of nation to rearticulate a history of racial oppression and struggle which can energize the movement toward black empowerment and independence" (100). I would contend that the use of nation as a conceptual tool continues to produce a disabling politics of inconsistency and domination, and thus leaves Decker's argument in a weak position.

After dealing with the politics of the "boys" that Decker turns to the music and videos of Queen Latifah to recapture any moment of possibilities in what he terms nationalist rap. Decker wants to hold on to the discourse of nation, but by moving to Latifah he is forced to jettison nation in favour of a diasporic gathering—a fluidity of borders. I would contend, however, that Latifah's rap—especially "Ladies First"—defies nation as we know it in relation to rap's nationalism. Instead Latifah's music is diasporic, or what Paul Gilroy calls a black Atlantic "product." Monie Love from England raps on the same album and specific song and Winnie Mandela's image is in the video—all point to questions that exist beyond the strict confines of nation to address the more interesting and complex relations of transatlantic identifications and the historical relations, practices, memories and desires that the best rap evokes.

The diaspora is further explored in George Yudice's "The Funkification of Rio." Yudice writes of the ways in which subaltern youth in Brazil have begun to disrupt and challenge the mythic idea of racial harmony in Brazil through their cultural identifications. The *funkeiros*, contrary to popular belief, dance for the revolution. Their music calls for resistance to domination. The ways in which they acquire African American music circumvents the traditional capitalist mode of seller/consumer and instead operates very much in the form of a "cartel." Those with access to North America and in particular New York, bring in the music, which quickly makes the rounds in various reincarnated forms. Yudice's description of the pro-

duction and consumption of funk in Brazil echoes the development of sound-system culture in the Caribbean and its exportation to the U.S.A. that fuelled the formative days of rap.

However, the narrative that Yudice paints of rap and hip hop culture in Brazil is one of state cooperation and support. The state, in collaboration with rap artists and DJs, has supported a number of youth programs. It is not the same case with funk, thus the *funkeiros* are the targets of state harassment via the police. "The Funkification of Rio" is a solid article that demonstrates the relations of the black Atlantic and the transcultural sharing of black expressive cultures. The *funkeiros* subvert the spaces that are frequently used in Brazil to produce national myths of oneness (samba halls and soccer arenas). Thus the *funkeiros* are in the forefront of dismantling notions of national coherence as the state apparatus tries to literally force them—through harassment, murder and lack of radio-play of their music—out of the national imaginary.

Microphone Fiends comes on the heels of *Black Noise*, but they are vastly different books. Not simply because one is an edited collection and the other is not. Rose in *Black Noise* clearly demonstrates the emergence of rap music and hip hop culture as oppositional in the realm of a postindustrial or deindustrialized North America. Her discussion of graffiti is of particular importance to the complexity of her book. By insisting on locating graffiti as an important part of hip hop culture, Rose is able to demonstrate in a much stronger way the relationship between the politics of hip hop and the processes of deindustrialization and postindustrialization in America. For *Black Noise* the issue is not whether youth have an organized political movement, but that the practices of youth force us and them to live life differently, putting new encounters on the road/street/map.

Microphone Fiends, in trying to address the vastness of youth cultures, falls short of an attempt to demonstrate that youth culture is not always filled with possibilities. There is no discussion of the messiness of the hip hop nation, Gen Xers,

Slackers, those who make it in, and those who are out. The very category of "youth" needs to be theorized and interrogated—regardless of the book's intended audience—since it is clearly not transparent. What about the cultural politics of conservative and fundamentalist youth who are organizing in the anti-abortion movement; organizing against affirmative action, equity and access; campaigning for conservative political parties; or who are members of the Third Millennium?

Rinaldo Walcott is a *Border/Lines* collective member.

Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. New York: Verso, 1993

BY Bill Little

Why is it possible to manipulate signs and meanings? This is not merely a formal question for the Left, as the last thirty or so years of inquiry into the arbitrary relations of signifier and signified have proven. It is more of an anathema to the Left, on both theoretical and practical grounds. If the great emancipatory projects remain unfulfilled, it is due to the difficulty of making things mean what they should mean.

In Germany and Austria, for example, long-repressed phantoms of the Left have reappeared to make their challenges, and on the Left's very homeground of the post-War years—the hegemony of signs of the European social imaginary. The emergence of Neonazism is emblematic. In the last year, people in Vienna were shocked to discover that Neo-Nazis had been conducting paramilitary training exercises in the Vienna Woods, which surround the city. There were German-style firebomb attacks on refugee centres and skinhead rallies against "drugs." The government hastily rewrote the Verbotsgesetz, (the forbidden-activities law) on National Socialist Wiederbetätigung, or reenactment, to

make it more enforceable. A number of trials ensued against neo-Nazi firebombers and hate literature propagandists, culminating in September with VAPO (People's Extra-parliamentary Opposition) "Führer" Gottfried Küssel's ten-year sentence for publicly airing his views on National Socialism on American Television. During the same time Jörg Haider's right-wing Freiheitspartei (the Austrian Freedom Party), seemingly riding a new tide of populism and electoral victory, sponsored a referendum to severely restrict the number of refugees and foreigners entering the country. It was unsuccessful but opened up, as Haider said, "the left wing's monopoly of history." More recently a series of letter bombs targeted human rights and refugee advocates, including the mayor of Vienna who lost three fingers.

The resulting instability in the political climate seems symptomatic of Left ineffectiveness. It is a problem of significance as much as anything. The safety net of social democratic order and discourse, grounded fundamentally in reference to the Holocaust and Fascism, is on the defensive. That the far Right can control the social agenda attests to the virulence of its significations and the mysterious weakness of those of the Left. It is more than the apparent inability of the government to condemn unequivocally the extreme Right or find strong counter-positions on its issues. It runs to a deeper equivocation of the Left about itself and to a failure to realize its project.

In Canada, too, I am surprised, upon returning after being away, to discover how solidly the corporate discourse has established itself, with the deficit and free trade. In a recent article in *Saturday Night*, Rick Salutin lamented the inability of any of the three socialist provincial governments to mount an effective discursive (or any other) attack on the encroachment of a corporate-dictated agenda. They, like the coalition governments of Germany and Austria, do not seem to be able to articulate a strong position against the Right. The relevant question might not be "Why can't they articulate their position better," but, "What if they could articulate it?"

The paradox that Baudrillard poses in

The Transparency of Evil is familiar, but it addresses the above question. He is not breaking any new thematic ground for himself here when he argues that progressive movements, constrained to demonstrate and interpolate the meaningfulness behind social relationships, ironically end up by emptying the social of meaningfulness. Now he seeks to show that a sort of internal expiry has infected the Left (or the modernist project) without Leftists knowing it. He suggests that "after the orgy" of leftist analyses since the 1960s, everything that could have been liberated has been, but only from any fixed referentiality, value, origin, purpose or place. It has all been represented, all pushed onto the agenda, but in an attitude, says Baudrillard, of endless self-reproduction and proliferation. What has disappeared, or been transformed, is the imaginary, the *trompe l'oeil*, the perspectivism, that, by representing us to ourselves in an illusory double or mirror, also acted as a resistance to the realization of discourse. The great drives, thoroughly symbolic, existed in anticipatory desire for their ends. This was their imaginary function, to see themselves reflected in their magnitude as transcendence, discovery, the infinite, and to violently deny

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

the past, overstep the present and command the future. The imaginary image existed in an anticipatory tension with the project, a "hot," antagonistic or otherwise tenuous distance that allowed discourse to determine itself, to pose limits, and as a by-product, to create the ground for a violence of forms, transgressions of laws, passion of identity.

The implosion or collapse of the