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**POETIC RESURRECTION: THE BRONX IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE, SINA A. NITZSCHE (2020)**

Bielefeld: Transcript, 217 pp.,  
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*Reviewed by Jeffrey Ian Ross, University of Baltimore*

This book, written by German scholar Sina A. Nitzsche, addresses contemporary popular culture depictions and representations produced during and as a response to the ‘shrinkage’ (i.e. abandonment, deindustrialization and population decline) of The Bronx. The study is motivated by Nitzsche’s East German origins, derives from her doctoral dissertation in American Studies, that included several research stays in The Bronx, and a deep analysis of selective American books, films and a song set in this iconic borough of New York City.

In order to accomplish this ambitious goal, the author confronts contemporary popular stereotypes of The Bronx, and examines the relevance of hip hop culture which has its origins in the borough. Nitzsche also connects these popular texts to the pervasive themes in American culture like stories about people who rose from rags to riches, the frontier and the American dream. The book argues that while having some basis in reality, popular depictions of The Bronx, by the news media, are mostly flawed, and contrast with the creativity of selected recent books, movies and music that is set in and coming out of The Bronx.

In addition to an introduction and conclusion, the book is divided into four chapters. The ‘Introduction: Welcome to The Bronx’ further builds on the rationale for the study and considers itself to be ‘the first book-length analysis on cultural representations of the shrinking Bronx’. The author states, ‘[t]he news organizations channeled the fear of the so-called inner city by reducing the entire borough to the imagined space of the South Bronx’ (13). The balance of this section lays out what the individual chapters of the book will cover and accomplish.

Chapter 1, ‘Approaching the boogie down: The Bronx, popular culture and the poetic resurrection’, ‘explains how historians have dealt with The Bronx and how their approaches inspire [...] [Nitzsche’s] subsequent analysis of popular culture texts from a cultural studies framework’ (18). After a long discussion on convergence culture, the chapter reviews both the contributions and shortcomings of the scholarship focusing on The Bronx. It also introduces Nitzsche’s concept of poetic resurrection, a term used to describe the multiple creative responses articulated in literature, cinema and music (including the birth of the Hip Hop Movement), to the decline of The Bronx. Most discussions of race are done in the context of each cultural artefact that Nitzsche reviews.

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Chapter 2, 'The Bronx is not lost: Remembering the success story in literature', analyses important autobiographies that were primarily set in The Bronx by predominantly Eastern European Jewish authors who lived there. In addition to thoroughly examining each one of them, Nitzsche scrutinizes the reviews that were produced and tried to tie this to the physical and emotional space of The Bronx.

In Chapter 3, 'Zooming in on the devastation: The Bronx as an urban frontier in film', Nitzsche poses the question, 'in what ways do filmic productions facilitate its poetic resurrection in the age of decline?' (97). In her own words she states, '[t]his chapter explicates why filmmakers are so fascinated by or even obsessed with the decaying urban landscape' (100). After analysing a handful of films, Nitzsche focuses on three popular ones: *Fort Apache: The Bronx*, *Gloria* and *Wolfen*.

Chapter 4, 'Creating a new popular culture: Re-imagining the American dream in Hip-Hop', follows in a similar vein to the previous chapters. It reviews Charlie Ahern's movie *Wild Style*, largely about the struggles of graffiti writers in The Bronx, the rap song 'The Message', performed by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and then a book of photographs by Joe Conzo, *Born in The Bronx: A Visual Record of the Early Days of Hip-Hop*.

'Conclusions: Global dimensions of the poetic resurrection', the most thoughtful chapter in the book, reiterates how '[t]he literary, visual, and audio-visual texts strongly reject the common perception of The Bronx as a one-dimensional, dangerous, hostile, isolated, dehumanized, and ultimately "un-American" disaster zone propagated in much of American news and journalistic media outlets of its time' (186). Although The Bronx sustained considerable economic decline, it has also been a place where there has been a flourishing of literary and visual creativity. The conclusion contextualizes Nitzsche's findings, examines alternative theoretical framings that she could explore, and how many of the approaches that were applied to The Bronx, could be used with other American cities like Detroit, and the possibility that the same could be done in a global context.

Nitzsche's *Poetic Resurrection* makes a number of important contributions to our understanding of The Bronx, contemporary popular culture and the growth of hip hop. First, Nitzsche's study contributes to research on post-growth societies (ones in which the economy and society does not need continued increases in the gross domestic product). As we are entering a new post-COVID era, *Poetic Resurrection*, conducts an analysis of an urban place in the era of postmodernism. Her study could serve as an analytic model of how The Bronx, New York City and other similar urban areas in the United States and beyond recover from the coronavirus crisis. Second, although many researchers talk about interdisciplinarity, they hardly go beyond their own subject specialization. Nitzsche, on the other hand, successfully crosses the boundaries of core subjects by putting hip hop culture next to literature, film and other media texts. Third, the book combines selective important scholarship from the fields of cultural, media and urban studies into her theoretical framework. Not content to simply review selected cultural texts, Nitzsche applies a significant number of important and relevant contemporary theoretical constructs to these products. Finally, Nitzsche does a great job investigating how urban shrinkage is represented in popular culture using an interdisciplinary approach. This is both novel and interesting. Why? Few studies have been conducted about this topic. Urban studies has typically ignored the role of popular culture in the urban shrinking processes. Nitzsche's research fills

this gap by combining urban and media studies approaches to learn more about how urban transformation processes are negotiated in popular media.

Most importantly, however, Nitzsche does a great job describing and analysing in detail selective cultural products that are set in The Bronx. Not only does she review prominent books, films and music that are set in this borough of New York City to argue her point, but she considers additional texts that have been produced on these items, and tries to contextualize them in the present historical context of The Bronx. Nitzsche's analysis is thoughtful and she leaves no stone unturned in her examination of each contemporary cultural artefact. Moreover, she goes beyond simply reviewing the content of these products to consider the genres and packaging too.

Those wishing for a thoughtful and engaging book on the popular depictions of The Bronx, that goes beyond the news media-generated stereotypes, that attempts to integrate selected elements of hip hop culture (that has a tendency to see its self as a collection of separate parts, rather than a collective whole), should definitely consider reading *Poetic Resurrection*.

### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jeffrey Ian Ross, Ph.D., is a professor in the College of Public Affairs, School of Criminal Justice, at the University of Baltimore. Ross has researched, written and lectured primarily on corrections, policing, political crime, crimes of the powerful, violence, street culture, graffiti and street art, and crime and justice in American Indian communities for over two decades. His work has appeared in many academic journals and books, as well as popular media. He is the author, co-author, editor or co-editor of several books including most recently, the *Routledge Handbook of Street Culture* (Routledge, 2021) and *Convict Criminology for the Future* (Routledge, 2021).

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