

Global Hip Hop Studies

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***SOUNDING RACE IN RAP SONGS, LOREN KAJIKAWA (2015)***

Oakland: University of California Press, 224 pp.,  
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What does Blackness sound like? How is Black identity constructed and understood through popular culture? In particular, how does music function as a messenger and conveyer of racial identity in contemporary society? Throughout *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (2015), Loren Kajikawa insightfully outlines the variety of ways that rap music, as an element of hip hop culture – and Black culture more broadly – has made race audible to listeners and fans. Kajikawa asks: ‘How did rap music gain the ability to make race audible?’ (Kajikawa 2015: 3). Through four chapters dedicated to a different phase of rap music – Sugarhill Gang’s ‘Rapper’s Delight’, Public Enemy’s ‘Rebel Without a Pause’, Dr Dre’s ‘Nuthin But a ‘G’ Thang’ and lastly, Eminem’s ‘My Name Is...’ – the book explains how musicians’ voice concerns, reach audiences and articulate the attitudes and cultural sensibilities of the Hip Hop generation’ (4).

Kajikawa takes a different approach though. A lot of hip hop scholarship is concerned with lyrics, performing textual analyses on syntax and song content. This work, however, calls attention to the producer and seeks to explain how technical sound choices amplify and transform the information listeners receive from lyrics or music videos (12). As such, Kajikawa focuses on the breakbeats, samples and loops which create the ‘vibe’ that also signifies racial identity, fundamental to the genre of rap music. The result is a comprehensive illustration of how music can be a history, a map, a portrayal of identity and an archive.

**A HISTORY**

*Sounding Race in Rap Songs* seeks to demonstrate how rap music is a representation of race in that songs portray sonic qualities of Blackness in the United States. In order to do this, each chapter takes as its focus a commercially successful single by some of rap’s most popular artists. Kajikawa then uses the song as a lens through which to examine how music constructs and builds racial understandings. For example, Sugarhill Gang’s ‘Rapper’s delight’ is used to explain how recorded sound changed the attitudes of rappers and producers who were accustomed to the confines of club performance alone. Producer Sylvia Robinson translated club practices such as chanting, call-backs, ‘street slang’ and ‘jive talk’ into ‘shorter, saleable units’ thus giving birth to the pre-recorded rap single whereby MCs and DJs could develop new, more complex themes in their raps which were listened to in new environments such as cars, bedrooms and through the boombox (47). Kajikawa expertly examines song

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structure and DJ turntable techniques that changed due to recorded sound and therefore helped characterize the genre. Embedded here is the importance of the drum/bass sound and the drum rhythm sound which DJs isolate to create the breakbeat.

Limiting his focus to hip hop, Kajikawa does not take this opportunity to discuss the broader centrality of the drum to the history of Black music globally – from Africa, to Cuba, to Haiti, to Brazil, to North America (Floyd Jr 1997). Understanding the centrality of the drum is, of course, critical to understanding how race sounds in contemporary society and without this historical and global perspective, the connections to a longer trajectory of racial identity are missing for the uninitiated reader. Further, historicizing the turntable and the vinyl record requires a fuller understanding of the critical role of music technology. The technologies available to Black youth in New York during the emergence of hip hop are fundamental to understanding how they understood sound and manipulation. Using the turntable and the vinyl record ‘incorrectly’ created the art form and the conventions of the genre. Producers were required to experiment with machines in ways that disregarded intended use but the machines themselves allowed them to create in the first place. Herbert Marcuse, for instance, states that technology as an instrument and a device organizes and perpetuates social relationships and behaviour patterns and as such, the technical apparatus is part of the social process (Marcuse 1941). For the world Kajikawa is writing about, the record and the turntable make the articulation of race possible.

## A MAP

Kajikawa’s argument is concise and most compelling in Chapter 2: ‘Rebel without a pause’, where the rearticulation of racial identity is described through Public Enemy’s sampling techniques. Public Enemy did not confirm Black identity or a Black aesthetic; instead, they reimagined Blackness by recombining familiar ideas and values in ‘hitherto unrecognized ways’ (Omi and Winant 1994: 163). Here, the ‘harsh timbres and clashing rhythms’, and ‘abrasive [...] nagging wavering sounds’ become a ‘Black fist in the air’ and a powerful symbol of Black resistance (Kajikawa 2015: 50). Again, this is not about lyrical content – revolutionary no doubt – but about the expressive powers of the producer in their sampling choices and techniques. Public Enemy’s ‘unique approach to sound’ makes Kajikawa’s argument crystal clear: hip hop subverts conventions and reworks sounds of past music and in so doing becomes a map for the shifting racial politics of its time – for Public Enemy, this is uncompromising and confrontational. Taking sound as the object of study, performing a textual analysis of sound is well suited in this chapter. The connection between sound and identity is clear and comprehensive. Indeed, Kajikawa’s focus on sound in hip hop studies encourages a much needed holistic approach to studying music that accounts for the entirety of the listening experience. Articulating this experience is not just important for scholars but also for hip hop fans who understand the immersive nature of rap music best.

## A PORTRAYAL

Part II explores the ‘neoliberal nineties’ and starts off with Chapter 3: ‘Let Me Ride’, which explores the vibes of Dr Dre’s ‘Nuthin But a “G” Thang’, and ‘Ride Wit Me’, which evince the laid-back, sensual, gangsta freedom soundscape

that is definitive of West Coast rap music. In particular, the connections to car culture (ridin'round and gettin' it) and the mobility of the gangsta experience as a site of pleasure and empowerment are most poignant. This second section of Kajikawa's study is titled 'Rearticulating Race in the neo-liberal Nineties' and explains how gangsta rap foreshadowed conspicuous consumption by glorifying the material freedom potentially afforded by gang banging. There is more to the gangsta lifestyle than conspicuous consumption and mobility, however; gangsta freedom and hypermasculinity are premised on the lack of freedom for women and queer people. As such, Kajikawa obscures the other side of gangsta freedom which is not simply free and empowering. This chapter could have paid attention to the fact that Dr Dre's sound also laid the foundation for commercial hip hop that heavily promotes violence, criminality, sexual deviance and misogyny (Rose 2008: 3; Morgan 2000; Pough 2004). In order to discuss Dr Dre in particular (given his own allegations of abuse against women), Kajikawa should acknowledge, as Tricia Rose teaches, the 'gangsta' in hip hop does not exist without the 'gangsta-pimp-ho trinity' (Rose 2008: 24).

### AN ARCHIVE

This critique extends to many areas of the book that reinforce a singular, mainstream, hegemonic, heteronormative history of hip hop that is constantly reinforced in both popular culture and academia. This is evident in the four examples chosen as the pillars that structure the book; they undoubtedly changed the course of hip hop, but there is no denying that they are mainstream commercial hits inextricably tied to corporate interests. In this, there is an erasure of grassroots, underground styles of groups like Freestyle Fellowship, for instance, that helped lay the foundation for the laid-back sound of the West Coast. It must be noted that Kajikawa does critically acknowledge that these are not the only stories that can or should be told about rap music (Kajikawa 2015: 16). Others can and should take on the multiple stories to be told by a variety of scholars; it is certainly impossible for one scholar to take on all issues that are unique to hip hop culture. Kajikawa makes his point of view clear however; in the following paragraph on page 16, he states that the songs chosen open the window on 'rap authenticity' and therefore can be interpreted as reinforcing the notion that songs by male rappers are the epitome of authentic and true rap music which is worthy of historicization. So too, does this case-study structure of this focused analysis obscure the impact of women like the Grammy-winning Lauryn Hill who combined styles of live instrumentation and sampling on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* to make a statement about her place in the culture. On that note, other than Sylvia Robinson (an extremely important figure in history), Kajikawa does not include women and therefore sidelines a robust focus on gender and sexuality – intersections which are obviously linked to any discussion of race. This means that readers and instructors alike must constantly amend the work to reflect a more accurate portrayal of rap music.

Documenting the history of hip hop is crucial for its survival. There are currently less than fifteen hip hop archives in North America and all of them are attached to institutions like Harvard's Hip Hop Archive, the Cornell Hip Hop Collection, The Schomburg Centre, Northside Hip Hop Archive and The Gates Preserve Archive. Hip Hop Archivist Syreeta Gates says that: 'Hip Hop has gone from the corner to the ivory tower' (Gates 2020: n.pag.). Libraries

and university spaces now house hip hop's stories; in this way, scholars are not only analysts, but archivists. This comes with a political responsibility to make choices about what to document, elevate and etch into history. Omitting women, queer people and 'underground' rappers means that Kajikawa is only narrowly exploring the sounds of race. There are many dimensions to this sound.

Despite these critiques, the methodology Kajikawa uses is insightful and complex and is far and away the take away from this book; looking at sound, structure and song composition opens space for a potentially rich analysis that can be applied to a wide variety of music. Taking on this method is a worthwhile endeavour for analyses of gender, identity, geography, history, technology and much more. Undertaking a more holistic approach to the songs which shape hip hop culture requires more than lyrical analysis and Kajikawa's method is a strong map for how to take this on. As such, using the method and applying it to a wider variety of music will be a worthwhile endeavour for other scholars. Viewing the book as an example of creative, alternative methods can enable course leaders to use it as a resource and Kajikawa has provided a strong roadmap for how to do so.

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