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**HIP HOP VERSUS RAP: THE POLITICS OF DROPPIN' KNOWLEDGE,
PATRICK TURNER (2019)**

London: Routledge, 176 pp.,
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Reviewed by Pete Bearder

What *Hip Hop Versus Rap* has to say will be hard for some to hear. Turner challenges some of the narratives evangelized by 'raptivists' under the professional patronage of social and educational bodies. The book's concern is with youth centres and state-funded secondary schools. Hip hop education is being targeted at 11–21-year-olds who may have disengaged with the subject of English, or come from disadvantaged backgrounds or neighbourhoods. But how much do attempts to platform and develop the linguistic expression of young people actually 'liberate' that expression? Who does the liberating? If it is liberated, what artistic and social 'freedom' can something so contained by an institution actually deliver? Public policy is, in the words of Rupa Huq, 'a key prism through which twenty-first century rap operates' (Huq cited in 73). It is not without reason, then, that Turner interrogates the institutionalization of the art.

In doing so, Turner also attempts to disturb the territories of 'sacred' and 'profane' in the emcee's craft. Hip hop, he argues, should not be dichotomized as an authentic and principled vehicle of knowledge, that can be elevated from rap – a commercialized perversion of nihilistic gang culture. Indeed, attempts to do so may feed into a regime of behaviour monitoring and modification, that mediates and cleanses the expressive resources of young rappers.

Turner was rapping as a teenager in London during the early 1980s. He emerged from the punk scene at a time when it was fusing with rap, as well as dub, funk and other genres. His induction to rap, then, coincided with his induction to the sound system culture of dub reggae, and the DIY scene of the post-punk era. This background accounts for his strongly critical attitude towards cultural purism in rap 'where hip hop knowledge and consciousness morph into conspiratorial rhetoric' (41). It also gives foundation to his left-libertarian critique of 'the double helix of capital and state' (147).

During his time as a youth worker in the 1990s, Turner became wary of the ways that funding and education bodies sought to instrumentalize hip hop, infringing on the vernacular freedom of young people in the name of policy agendas. Fatherhood also appears to inform this book. Turner testifies against the enclosure of urban wilderness and the loss of unmonitored play that now affects the young. The surveillance culture of curfews, cameras and anti-social behaviour orders has infiltrated education in the guise of cultural democracy, the book argues. Turner engages with these controversies self-reflexively,

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writing from the perspective of a researcher who has inhabited many of the roles he critiques.

Chapter 2 addresses the 'consciousness' of many who claim to be ambassadors of the art. Where does advocacy of historically marginalized communities seep into nostalgia or fantasy? What do the more esoteric forms of hip hop spirituality tell us about those who preach them? Turner charts a 'fragile and embattled sense of social identity' that exalts hip hop consciousness as a Jedi mind skill against a global conspiracy, only detectable by those 'initiated' into its encrypted lore (41). He also deconstructs some pseudo-scientific analogies between the melanin of skin pigmentation and the black carbon pigmentation of vinyl (a more 'authentic' vehicle of pan-African creativity). Fieldnotes also reveal moments in which political awareness turn into outright black supremacism.

That such energy by what seemed sane and rational people was being invested in the running of social enterprises, educational workshops, life coaching seminars, and publishing operations devoted to the propagation of mystical and chauvinistic ideas was a depressing index of racialised alienation.

(54)

Nobody can accuse Turner of shying away from controversy. These are difficult matters to take on, and the author manages to approach volatile racial narratives while remaining candid about the distance and privilege he carries as a white researcher.

In Chapter 3, Turner embarks on an ethnography of the hip hop poet-educator Roger Robinson (who recently won the prestigious T. S. Eliot Prize for poetry). Robinson infuses hip hop workshops with a rigorous discipline of writing, as well as the oral tradition of his Trinidadian heritage. Turner suggests that Robinson's commitment to engaging at-risk youths with accessible poetics is at odds with Robinson's own exacting standards on page craft. He also flags some wider risks of hip hop and spoken word being used as therapy. Attempts to dismantle negative attitudes through emotional disclosure can become a technology to engineer people's selfhood, he argues. The resulting 'bars' may end up as sanitized, teacher-friendly iterations of a once-resistive aesthetic. The implications this has for the 'street poetic' of rap more generally are obvious and far-reaching.

As a spoken word artist who has taught my craft in schools, I am conflicted by Turner's implication of spoken word in this thesis. As a related but separate field, spoken word is often informed by different motives and traditions. *Hip Hop Versus Rap* is not a full evaluation of spoken word projects, or the ways they may create artistic communities where there might otherwise be none. Nor does the book assess the many benefits of live performance in the classroom. The field of spoken word education is evolving rapidly. Increasingly, the practice applies the dual-discipline of page/stage craft with a greater complexity than is suggested by some of the ethnographic sketches in this book. I also struggled to resolve the book's assertion that 'young people's lyrical transcripts neither require facilitation or reform' (148), with its warning that cultural democracy risks patronising young people (77). Should rap battles have no place in a school? What are the health and educational benefits of using rap as a form of creative education? How do performance disciplines elasticate young people's conception of, and engagement with literature? This book is not a full appraisal of these questions.

Nevertheless, Turner presents well-founded warnings to educators. Verbal expression has a limited capacity to liberate. Autobiographical writing in workshop settings risks conforming to the poetry slam-friendly ethics of confessional verse. The book's exploration of hip hop's institutionalization feeds broader concerns over the processes by which countercultural expression becomes a palliative of 'the self-improvement industry' – the growing market of a pathologically individualist modernity. Well-intentioned agendas, Turner warns, risk becoming more concerned with channelling youth angst into acceptable forms of self-expression than pursuing radical, collective strategies. Chapter 3 ends by advocating a wider struggle against the structural oppression young people experience. An example given is London's 'Take Back the City' campaign – a grassroots initiative to reclaim public space and wellbeing against the encroachments of private property and neoliberal urban planning.

Chapter 4, "'Life-bars" for grime prevention', asserts the book's relevancy for the 'post hip hop' generation. UK grime, which he describes as 'the mash-up bastard spawn of a three way [*sic*] union between dance hall, garage and hip hop', is presented as a form of sound poetry where the way bars sound can be more important than what the bars say (83). Lyrical content, says Turner, is eschewed for another form of linguistic capital: 'rhythmical poise, formidable breath control and dynamic oral cavity hydraulics' (87). Flow, stagecraft and lyrical dexterity are everything.

The chapter does not champion violent or nihilistic lyricism, so much as identify a 'mutant rhizomatic strand' of 'raptivism' where 'validation segues into "channelling and control"' – an attempt to police the bars being spat (95). Turner defends the self-legislation of rap cyphers. Here, the cypher is depicted as what Hakim Bey might call a 'temporary autonomous zone', a closed circle of transgression and trust. Turner recounts an attempt to approach one such 'knot of bodies' during his research:

The couple of times when I'm unable – against my better judgement – to resist the urge to bear down on one of the cyphers, it simply melts away without so much as a word of protest and reassembles elsewhere.

(84)

The chapter might also have applied its investigation of the genre to the grime-inspired poetry and theatre of artists like Sabrina Mahfouz or Debris Stevenson. Such aesthetic mutations appear to mirror the path of hip hop.

It is hip hop theatre that Turner analyses in his final chapter, attempting to define the form through the varying lenses of the hip hop's contested identities. In a playful denouement to the themes of the book, theatre is used to explore the 'N' word and the politics of cultural ownership and piracy.

Turner's taste for obscure words is both edifying and infuriating. This is definitely an academic book. Turner is a sociologist, but the book is of relevance to the humanities, as well as those involved in critical pedagogy, social movements, cultural studies and the politics of race, crime and young people.

While conceptually dense, Turner's prose is also elegantly crafted. The writing comes to life in the field notes, where street corner cyphers, post gig arguments and failed lectures are brought to life with a cinematic eye for detail.

In summary, this is a bold and stimulating read. Building on the work of Jeff Chang, the book presents hip hop as a global set of phenomena that is neither fixed nor ethically pure, sacred nor profane. Sociology's collectivist left-wing tradition (that has evolved out of the European Marxist academic

influence) is brought to bear on strategies of liberation, “some” of which are condemned as ‘moralising and intellectually shallow’ (140). This is a challenging agitation, but one motivated by a love of the craft and an affinity with the organic or ‘road’ intellectuals that compose the movement. Whether or not we agree with Turner’s thesis, it would be wise for all who care about hip hop to know where they stand on it.

REFERENCE

Bey, Hakim (2017), *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, New York: Autonomedia.