

Tricia Rose. 2008. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters*. New York: Basic/Civitas Books.

Reviewed by Beau Bothwell

As hip hop slowly settles into middle age, the pitched battles of its younger years have frozen in a stalemate. Critics of hip hop repeat the same attacks they leveled at NWA, decrying violence, misogyny, and homophobia in hip-hop lyrics, and in the most extreme cases branding its creators as Typhoid Marys for a particularly virulent social pathology. Defenders respond with rebuttals codified in the early 1990s, lauding the aesthetic value and social relevance of their favorite corners of the hip-hop world, eliding any problems inherent in the rest, and questioning the true motives of hip hop's critics. As Tricia Rose tells it, these arguments have remained essentially static, even as hip hop experienced two remarkable—though opposing—developments.

First, hip hop *expanded*. The dress, music, dance, and visual style that grew up in the South Bronx not only took hold throughout American culture, but throughout cultures of the world. Within the US media landscape, hip hop music, fashion, and visual aesthetics became ubiquitous. Outside of the US, local hip-hop movements emerged around the world, whether in the form of a few MCs in a bedroom reciting Tupac lyrics in English, or a full-fledged scene in a local language and style. Remaining closely identified with urban, black youth (in ways that Rose describes as sometimes quite unhealthy), hip hop has become an aspect of self-definition for a widespread and diverse group of people, many of whom identify as part of the “Hip-Hop Generation” united less by a period of birth than by a set of shared cultural practices (Kitwana 2002).

Thanks in no small part to Rose herself, hip hop has also found a home in the academy. The “Hip-Hop University” that began with scholars like Rose (1994), Todd Boyd (1997), and Michael Eric Dyson (2001) has been populated with an ever growing list of names that includes Mark Anthony Neal (2004), Robin Kelley (1997), Bakari Kitwana (2002), Murray Forman (2004), Jeff Chang (2005), Imani Perry (2004), and dozens of others working across a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. The number of courses on hip hop offered in the American universities reaches into the hundreds, and institutional forums for hip-hop scholarship like the Hiphop Archive at Harvard's W.E.B DuBois Institute and a variety of formal study groups for graduate students and more senior scholars have sprung up across the country.¹

Current Musicology

In counterpoint to this expansion of hip hop's geographic and institutional reach, Rose argues that hip hop *contracted* during the same period. Within the most popular and prominent American commercial hip hop the range of expression and subject matter, the kinds of stories that rappers told (or rather got paid to tell), shrank dramatically. This is not to say that the multiplicity of styles and voices found in some "Golden Age" of hip hop has been lost altogether; according to Rose, while that variety still exists and has even expanded across innumerable borders, the most prominent face of the music—mainstream, commercial, US hip hop performed by African-Americans—has become dominated to a remarkable extent by what she calls the "Gangsta, Pimp, Ho Trifecta." In a brief but insightful discussion included in her introduction, Rose traces much of this phenomenon to massive consolidation in both the recording and broadcast arms of the US music industry during the 1990s. Though extremely critical of the corporate system under which US hip hop operates, she distributes blame for the current state of affairs across a much wider range of actors:

"Mainstream" white America, black youth, black moguls (existing and aspiring), and big mass-media corporations together created hip hop's tragic trinity, the black gangsta, pimp, and ho—the cash cow that drove the big mainstream crossover for hip hop. (25)

The primacy of gangsta-focused music is attributed to the interaction of these forces:

black ghetto gangsta-based sales are the *result* of marketing manipulation and the *reflection* not only of specific realities in our poorest black urban communities but also of the *exploitation* of already-embedded racist fears about black people. (25)

The current description of the book might sound like yet another entry into the "Hip Hop is Dead" genre of criticism, but thankfully, Rose has something else in mind.² Rather than an historical analysis of the causes for commercial hip hop's narrowing of field, or a critical analysis of artistic production in the vein of her seminal *Black Noise* (1994), Rose's focus is the discourse surrounding hip hop. The book is an attempt to shake up the stagnant discussions about hip hop and its social impact, which "stand in for discussion of significant social issues related to race, class, sexism, and black culture" (11).

This is not simply a nostalgic call for a return to the golden days when hip hop was seen as a progressive, communal force. Rose argues that hip hop is intertwined with discussions of the social and political position of poor black youth, as well as discussions of race, class, and gender generally in a

wider US context. The extent of this linkage, and the fundamental truth of Rose's point, is illustrated somewhat ironically in conservative linguist and political commentator John McWhorter's recent book *All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can't Save Black America* (2008). McWhorter begins with the thesis that hip hop is simply music for music's sake without any political valence, and subsequently spends the remainder of the book describing the wrongheadedness of the political positions outlined in hip hop, proposing his own explanations and solutions for the problems described therein. Published at nearly the same time, and in a direct rebuttal to scholars like Rose, McWhorter's book accidentally proves Rose's point; arguments that begin with hip hop often end up in politics, even when the person arguing tries to separate the two.

The problem for Rose is not only that she finds the most popular examples of a music she loves artistically predictable and socially indefensible, though she does write passionately and directly about her own conflicting emotions towards hip hop. Rose's main worry is that arguments over the social import of hip hop have become the most visible (and sometimes the only) public discussions about the problems facing poor black youth in America. As such, the unchanging accusations about hip hop's destructive impact on black youth serve to mask what Rose describes as the longstanding systemic conditions that have direct and negative effects on their lives. At their worst, these charges use hip hop to blame black youth for problems endemic to American society as a whole, in a centuries old pattern by which African Americans are used as scapegoats for general societal problems. On the other side of the debate, continuous and unconditional defense of hip hop does no service to black youth, for whom the sexism, homophobia, violence, and self-destructive attitudes represented by the "Gangsta, Pimp, Ho Trifecta" are real and serious problems. For Rose, the primary effect of an unquestioning defense of commercial hip hop, whether on the grounds of artistic freedom, ghetto authenticity, or anything else, leads to the absence of a constructive, healthy critique, which might allow hip hop to grow into an effective progressive force. According to Rose:

The current state of conversation about hip hop sets destructive and illiterate terms for cross-racial community building. The people most injured by the fraught, hostile, and destructive state of this conversation are those who most need a healthy, honest, vibrant (not sterile and repressed) cultural space: young, poor, and working-class African-American boys and girls, men and women—the generation that comprises the future of the black community. They have the biggest stake in the conversation, and they get the shortest end of the stick in it. (11)

Current Musicology

Rose attempts to change the conversation by addressing a “Hip Hop Top Ten: the top-ten arguments about hip hop, five from each side of the debate” (25). This project takes up the bulk of her book, and while conservative hip-hop critics will doubtless find more to disagree with in her characterization of their positions, both sides of the debate face a great deal of criticism. The goal here is not simply to rebut each argument—Rose usually finds at least a grain of truth in each claim. Instead, she attempts to illustrate how the simplistic mode of argumentation favored by critics and defenders alike obscures the true nature of the problems with which critics of hip hop are ostensibly concerned.

From the “hip hop critics” camp she addresses the following claims in successive chapters: “Hip Hop Causes Violence,” “Hip Hop Reflects Black Dysfunctional Ghetto Culture,” “Hip Hop Hurts Black People,” “Hip Hop is Destroying American Values,” and “Hip Hop Demeans Women.” In each chapter, she attempts to evaluate the truth of the claim to whatever extent possible, but also examines the ways in which their simplistic application serves political purposes that are more like those of the speaker than of the affected audience.

Rose’s writing becomes quite impassioned at times, especially when discussing critics of hip hop whose concern for issues like sexism and homophobia never seems to extend beyond appearing on television to criticize rappers. While Rose is enlivened in the debate over whether commercial hip hop demeans women (it does) or directly causes violence (it probably doesn’t), she is especially critical of those who use hip hop as a general means to myopically criticize black youth culture in a way that completely ignores both the context for that culture and the context from which the youth are speaking. She has a point, too. For example, conservative critics who decry hip hop’s “anti-education” message as part of a dysfunctional black culture have to willfully ignore an awful lot of political discourse in order to characterize disdain for overeducated, pointy-headed elites as a particularly *black* phenomenon.

While Rose addresses each of these five arguments in great detail, her primary problem with many of the critiques of hip hop lies in the focus on a condemnation of *individual behavior* rather than concern for alleviating systemic factors that encourage those behaviors.

This hyper-behavioralism—an approach that overemphasizes individual action and underestimates the impact of institutionalized forms of racial and class discrimination—feeds the very systematic discrimination it pretends isn’t a factor at all. (8)

In a similar vein, she finds that many of the cries of misogyny are nothing more than a call for rappers to stop using the word “bitch,” without any real desire to alter a patriarchal system, redefine notions of masculinity based on power over women, or fundamentally alter the social system which confines black women to a set of narrow social roles.

Up to this point much of Rose’s critique will be familiar to those who follow the classic debates in hip hop, though she engages with each of the arguments at a deeper level than one typically sees in either the journalistic or academic discourse. However, for the next section of the book, she begins to dismantle arguments from hip-hop defenders—a varied group in which Rose includes artists, producers, fans, and many of the same hip hop scholars who wore out their dog-eared copies of *Black Noise* in 1994. From the “hip hop defenders” side, Rose includes chapters on the following typical justifications for hip hop: “Just Keeping it Real,” “Hip Hop is Not Responsible for Sexism,” “There are Bitches and Hoes,” “We’re Not Role Models,” and “Nobody Talks about Positivity in Hip Hop.”

Just as she sees the anti-hip-hop argument as too focused on individual behavior, Rose sees hip hop’s defenders as too focused on the explication of structural problems:

Increasingly, too many of hip hop’s supporters point to structural racism to explain the origins of the problem but refuse to link these structural forces to individual action and to the power of media seduction. By failing to posit a progressive strategy for responding to negative behavior effects, these pro-hip hop spokespeople actually fuel the “dysfunctional black culture” thesis. (73)

Rose labels this half of the debate as the “explain” portion of an endless cycle of “blame and explain,” where one side attacks and blames, the other side explains, and neither side appears that invested in actually working to change things (129). This is the “startling” unspoken agreement that Rose sees behind the stalemate in the hip hop debate—that both sides seem to be arguing under some of the same operating assumptions. In one of the most trenchant chapters, Rose explores what she calls the “Mutual Denials in the Hip Hop Wars.” Among these are a willingness to accept homophobia as acceptable or at least unavoidable, a tendency to ignore the role of white consumption in the creation and development of commercial hip hop, and a disregard for the creative content of the music, whether by critics who dismiss it as worthless or supporters whose defense of hip hop extends so far as to require no creative standards at all—a position which she sees as equally dismissive. While there has been no small amount of criticism of

Current Musicology

mainstream hip hop from the academy, Rose spends much of the book attempting to jar the pro-hip hop community out of a complacency that allows them to explain and describe, rather than work to change.

Rose's colleagues in the world of hip-hop studies are certainly among the desired audience for *The Hip Hop Wars*, but this is not an especially scholarly book in tone or focus—she writes for her colleagues, for a general audience of hip-hop fans and detractors, for members of the latest “hip-hop generation,” and for their worried parents. She also writes with a pamphleteer's flare for politics, finishing the book with a chapter titled, “Six Guiding Principles for Progressive Creativity, Consumption, and Community in Hip Hop and Beyond,” and at times directly calling out her compatriots in the hip hop academy:

Visible male social critics who defend hip hop need to hold the artists with whom they are in apparent dialogue to a very serious standard . . . To continue to make general statements against its sexism but then show public love and support for artists who are unrepentant for their blatant and constant sexism is to support their sexism and encourage others to do the same. (129)

As the divisions in Rose's own work make clear, however, the line between appreciating positive artists and calling out negative ones is a difficult one to walk. Nas, whose classic *Illmatic* was recently paid the tribute of an edited volume of scholarly essays, lands on the “Progressive Artists” list at the back of the book, and is cited favorably several times. But as Rose is undoubtedly aware, every hip-hop head remembers the homophobic slurs in “Ether,” along with the complex feelings of pain she finds in “Gangsta Tears” (57). Kanye West makes the “Progressive” list as well, but the association might seem incongruous to those who only know the words to “Gold-digger.” On the other side of the equation, Lil Wayne, an incredibly talented rapper who takes deserved criticism from Rose for any number of typically sexist lyrics (and whose willingness to rap on absolutely anyone's record for a fee might make him the poster boy for Rose's “low creative standards” complaint about commercial hip hop), also wrote one of the most affecting protest songs of the Bush era in response to the administration's failures after Katrina hit his home town of New Orleans. This isn't necessarily a criticism of Rose's political ambitions (which are sorely needed), instead it is an affirmation of the strength of her larger argument. It makes no more sense to dismiss all of Nas's work as regressive because of “Ether” than it does to excuse Lil Wayne's sexism because of “Georgia . . . Bush,” and the same holds true for hip hop in general.

The Hip Hop Wars will undoubtedly find its way onto the syllabi of countless courses in the burgeoning “Hip-Hop University,” of which Rose is one of the founding members. And this is probably the perfect place for it. The back and forth Rose describes between defenders and critics continuously repeats itself in microcosm within the classroom, and her book will be useful for instructors who want to move a class out of that particular feedback loop. The book was not meant as a scholarly exploration of hip hop as a musical genre; while Rose definitely has the analytic powers to write about the attraction and value of the music, and the way it functions in peoples lives, you won’t find too much of that here. As such, her discussion of the relationship between musical discourse and politics will be of interest even to those without a specific interest in hip hop. However, I am somewhat wary of recommending *The Hip Hop Wars* to people who don’t already have some emotional investment in hip hop. There have been countless entries into the debate from those who don’t especially like hip hop but are nonetheless familiar with all of its faults, and I am not sure that we need any more. But works such as Rose’s *The Hip Hop Wars*, on the other hand—based on a deep love for the music and a concern for the people who make it, listen to it, and care about it—we need a lot more of those.

Notes

1. Harvard’s Hip-hop Archive keeps a running list of new course offerings related to hip hop at <<http://www.hiphoparchive.org/university/courses>>.
2. Most of the “Hip Hop is Dead” argument has taken place between the popular and genre press and artists themselves. For an overview of these discussions see Hess (2007) and Asanti (2008).

References

- Asanti, Molefi K. 2008. *It’s Bigger than Hip Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Boyd, Todd. 1997. *Am I Black Enough for You? Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and Beyond*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Chang, Jeff. 2005. *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. 2001. *Holler If You Hear Me*. New York: Basic/Civitas Books.
- Dyson, Michael E., and Sohial, Daulatzai, eds. 2010. *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas’s Illmatic*. New York: Basic/Civitas Books.
- Forman, Murray. 2004. *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony Neal. 2004. *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hess, Mickey. 2007. *Is Hip Hop Dead? The Past, Present, and Future of America’s Most Wanted Music*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Kelly, Robin D. G. 1997. *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Current Musicology

- Kitwana, Bakari. 2002. *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. New York: Basic/Civitas Books.
- McWhorter, John H. 2008. *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*. New York: Gotham Books.
- Perry, Imani. 2004. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.