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CHECK YOUR HEAD

The cultural politics of rap music

Nick De Genova

“They ride down the street at 2:00 A.M. with it blasting from car speakers and wake up my wife and kids,” grumbled the professor. “What’s the point in that?”

He wasn’t really looking for an answer; the point, of course, was that he felt there was no point at all—just niggers making noise. The conversation was about rap *music*, but a confusion of the music with a disruptive, disorderly, and implicitly dangerous “them” followed seamlessly. It was clear enough what the professor was professing. He was, after all, the chairman of a music department; his very position was staked upon the aggressive policing of morbid disciplinary boundaries, the academic housekeeping that keeps the university safe for the myths of whiteness and Western Civilization. Tricia Rose, however, was not so easily deflected. She was prepared to take the professor’s haughty, hostile question seriously, insisting that “rap music brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society.” *Black Noise* is her reply.

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In *Black Noise*, much of Tricia Rose’s analysis is evidently indebted to Steven Hager’s earlier effort to excavate a social context for hip-hop’s historical origins in *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti*. Like Hager, Rose points to the social calamity wrought upon the Bronx’s working-class communities by the urban renewal campaigns that accompanied the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. The notorious city planner in charge of the so-called slum clearance in the Bronx, Robert Moses, was candid enough about his social vision: “When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way through with a meat ax.” True to form, Moses’s frontal assault resulted in slum creation rather than clearance, and the Bronx emerged as America’s preeminent pop-cultural icon of urban apocalypse and barbarism.

To augment this by now customary Bronx tale, Rose tries to render a more elaborate picture of the socioeconomic

Discussed in this essay

Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, Tricia Rose, Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/The University Press of New England



Tricia Rose

Sue Kwon

transformations of what she calls “postindustrial New York.” Referencing urban sociologists John Mollenkopf, Manuel Castells, and David Walkowitz, Rose situates hip-hop in “the postindustrial urban context,” amid the large-scale economic restructuring of global capitalism. By “postindustrial,” she says, she means a “deindustrialization” of large urban centers—but not the wholesale extinction of manufacturing, nor the displacement of durable goods by “information.”

To characterize the global setting of postindustrial New York, Rose cites “the growth of multinational telecommunications networks, global economic competition, a major technological revolution, the formation of new international divisions of labor, the increasing power of finance relative to production, and new migration patterns from Third World industrializing nations.” The impact of these global processes on urban America, she suggests, has been an overall shift in the

occupational structure away from industrial jobs in manufacturing and toward information services, entailing an affluent technocratic stratum of predominantly white male professionals managing finance and commerce, a layer of mainly female and substantially black or Latino clerical and service workers, a reduced manufacturing sector composed preponderantly of immigrant Latino and Asian workers, and a growing unemployed or marginally employed population which is disproportionately black or Latino. These

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heightened inequalities in the urban division of labor were aggravated further by severe reductions in federal funding for social services, redlining in poor communities, the privatization of public services in the wake of deregulation, and the dwindling stock of affordable housing.

This outline of a generalized erosion of living conditions and opportunities in the urban United States, distinguished by spiraling misery and austerity programs posing as public policy, is certainly crucial to an understanding of the origins of hip-hop. And Rose is right when she tries to evade the conceptual and political dead-end of confining her discussion of these issues to the boundaries of the U.S. nation-state. Unfortunately, *Black Noise* never moves beyond a sort of impression-

istic inventory, a catalog of contemporary sociological developments; in this sense, what she provides is not analysis at all, but merely context.

What is most troubling about Rose's account of the postindustrial urban context is its narrowly economic—and hence, thoroughly depoliticized—focus. Without any political framework through which to understand the social conditions that accompanied the emergence of hip-hop in the mid-1970s, Rose cripples the possibilities for seriously engaging much of the overtly political content of today's rap music. The deindustrialization of big cities like New York was not simply an economic transformation, the inevitable consequence of intensified competition and technological innovation in a newly globalized capitalist environment. It must also be situated in the context of the tumultuous political battles that preceded it. In the years and decades immediately prior to Kool Herc's first experiments with break beats in the Bronx, black people across the United States had to pay with their lives to break down some of the most blatant forms of racist oppression and beat back the onslaught of racist terror. African Americans had been submitted to every conceivable indignity (and brutality) in the fight to eliminate the hallowed institutions of segregation in the South; rebellions had erupted in Harlem and Watts; tanks and paratroopers had been necessary to quell insurrections in Detroit and Newark; and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., set off literally hundreds of uprisings across the country, wherever there existed a substantial black population. These monumental events precipitated a crisis of political direction in black America, a crisis amplified by the

imprisonment or assassination of black radicals and the widespread absorption of reformist leaderships. All of this served to demobilize the mass movement, in the context of a racist hegemony in need of renovation.

The deindustrialization of the big cities, then, was a policy of aggressive disinvestment, one expression of a dramatic shift in the relative forces of the social struggle, within the U.S. nation-state and

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without. Even as a broad spectrum of black political leadership became increasingly convinced of the common purpose of the African American rebellion and anticolonial revolutions around the world, including the national liberation struggle in Vietnam, strategists in the Pentagon and the State Department were making the same connection. To put it plainly, U.S. imperialism abroad would be increasingly undermined if social conflict could not be contained at home. In Vietnam, by the mid-seventies it had become altogether obvious that the American war machine was embroiled in a counterrevolutionary war that would inevitably result in defeat. Domestically, however, the struggle had to be pursued relentlessly. The balance of power shifted quickly, as urban black working-class and poor people were squeezed by the sudden reduction of urban industry, while “white flight” accel-

erated wildly and urban spaces became increasingly militarized. In short, racial segregation and racist terror were restored in new, and perhaps more durable, forms. Nonetheless, the African American rebellion that had escalated in the 1960s was a mass struggle based in the ranks of the black working class and poor people. Tricia Rose, despite her sociological insight, has elected to sidestep this history. In preferring an economic interpretation that is indifferent to politics, Rose seems to have fallen under the spell of a dangerous and pervasive amnesia—the “end of history” trap.

The fallout of this indifference to politics, predictably, is an inflation of the claims of more properly *cultural* politics. “In the postindustrial urban context,” she writes, “. . . hip hop style is black urban renewal.” What she means by this formulation is perhaps clarified by her assertion that “rap musicians’ technological in(ter)ventions are not ends in and of themselves, they are means to cultural ends, new contexts in which priorities are shaped and expressed.” Even more ambitiously, she tells us that hip-hop’s formal aesthetics may provide a program for social action. Having identified the defining features of hip-hop style as flow, layering, and ruptures in line, Rose explains:

These effects at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena. Let us imagine these hip hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them. However, be also prepared for rupture, find pleasure in it, in fact, plan on social rup-

ture. When these ruptures occur, use them in creative ways that will prepare you for a future in which survival will demand a sudden shift in ground tactics.

The wistful utopianism of this passage is, sadly, surpassed only by its vacuity, utterly disconnected from any reference to concrete social circumstances or scenarios for practical action.

Black Noise is far more convincing when Rose situates hip-hop in its social contexts, as when she argues that hip-hop's initial appeal was as a coherent youth culture, providing an alternative space for identity and status formation. Again following Hager, Rose describes the demolition of neighborhoods and long-standing community institutions as the catalyst for a cultural style conducive to self-fashioning and new forms of communal life. Mainly African American and Puerto Rican, the young people who became graffiti taggers and muralists, break-dancers, DJs (disc jockeys), and MCs (rappers) engaged in a creative, performative, competitive, and (in the case of graffiti writing) adventurous reappropriation of public space, reinventing a sense of local community.

Always attentive to the distinctive technological dimensions of hip-hop's style and form, Rose relates that "early hip hop artists transformed obsolete vocational skills from marginal occupations into the raw materials for creativity and resistance. Many of them were 'trained' for jobs in fields that were shrinking or that no longer exist." Although she offers only a handful of examples to substantiate this claim—the most intriguing is Grandmaster Flash, who first learned about electronics while attending vocational school

at Samuel Gompers High—it is nevertheless a rather suggestive insight in her endeavor to make material linkages between her postindustrial narrative and the life histories of some prominent hip-hop innovators. Indeed, for a lucky few, hip-hop would also provide a means of upward social mobility.

Unlike Hager's history, however, *Black Noise* pays scant attention to the ways that the escalation of street-gang activity in the early 1970s in the Bronx provided another vibrant youth culture with which hip-hop, to a significant degree, was forced to compete. (Afrika Bambaataa, another hip-hop pioneer, was a former member of the Black Spades, a South Bronx youth gang. He created the Zulu Nation as a kind of new-style gang, more interested in hip-hop culture than crime.) In the wake of a deadly police crackdown on gang activity, hip-hop street culture was met with increasing repression (this was,

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and remains, true for virtually any unanctioned activities involving working-class black or Latino youth). Street parties and break dancing were suppressed because they were perceived as drawing boisterous and disorderly crowds. As graffiti proliferated, it became a symbol of the city administration's loss of control over the streets; eventually, extraordinary efforts would be made to eliminate it, in-

cluding the police murder of graffiti writer Michael Stuart in 1982.

Today, graffiti writing and muralism still thrive, though no longer on city subway cars; break dancing always seems to be on the verge of a comeback; and it's now possible to hear young rappers and DJs perform live in many cities across the United States. Still, it is indisputable that the most recognizable and coherent legacy of hip-hop is recorded rap music.

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Fifteen years have passed since the Sugar Hill Gang's debut rap single brought hip-hop to radio listeners across the United States. Rap music has become a multi-million-dollar proposition—one of the music industry's hottest commodities, a pervasive mass-media gimmick and a potent advertising tool. *Black Noise* is particularly informative in its thorough examination of rap music's relationship to the larger social forces at work in the production, distribution, and marketing of music and music video. In the case of hip-hop, the major entertainment conglomerates quickly sought out (and bought out) many of the most important independent hip-hop labels, though (uncharacteristically) they allowed them to operate with relative autonomy. Thus, hip-hop musicians, producers, and entrepreneurs gained access to the industry's vast means of production, distribution, marketing, and live performance—wildly exceeding the meager resources that had previously been available to them—but at a severe price. Like their predecessors in the R&B boom of the 1950s, the most successful rap artists have enjoyed tremendous publicity and remarkable social mobility, but ultimately

their share of the profits remains negligible. At the same time, most artists have only limited control over their own marketing—how they appear in videos, on packaging, in the public eye.

Despite the enormous profits that the music industry harvests from the commodification of hip-hop, the high profile that rap enjoys is never separable from what Rose calls the “hidden politics of rap.” By this she refers to the ways that hip-hop must contend with discriminatory insurance policies and rap concert bans at large performance venues (the avoidance of “unprofitable risks”), as well as the aggressive policing of rap fans in public spaces and the racist criminalization of rap audiences in the media. Indeed, her depiction of this less visible dimension of rap's place in the broader culture is another of the genuine achievements of *Black Noise*. Effectively frozen out of the major concert arenas in many large metropolitan centers, rap performers are cut off from opportunities for live interaction with mass gatherings of their audiences, precisely the occasions where the most politically committed rap artists enjoy the largest measure of pedagogical freedom.

Rose also provides a much-needed critique of the ways in which this “political economy” of rap concerts is subsumed by a more encompassing, sociologically derived media discourse on crime and violence that is widely implicated in the spatial control of black people. Through exaggerated coverage of violent incidents at rap shows, the media refortifies hegemonic constructions of black criminality, all the while disguising this racially inflected discourse with de-racialized language. In addition, she considers how rap

became attached to the infamous Central Park “wilding” incident and how the song “Cop Killer” by Ice-T’s heavy metal band Body Count was systematically mis-labeled in the press as a rap song. Rose also criticizes the Stop the Violence movement within the hip-hop community for their uncritical adoption of this kind of media sensationalism in their efforts to confront so-called black-on-black crime at rap concerts. She skillfully exposes the ways in which censorship efforts directed against heavy metal rock groups, for instance, rely on a protective discourse in which “our children” are threatened;

In the policing of rap shows, the fans themselves are presumed to be the threat

whereas in the policing of rap shows, the fans themselves are presumed to be the threat.

This racist paranoia about the potentially riotous consolidation of young African Americans’ rage at hip-hop shows—the clear and present danger—is regularly enacted through a rigorous and hostile policing of rap audiences. In a personal account, Rose explains: “I felt harassed and unwanted. This arena wasn’t mine; it was hostile, alien territory. The unspoken message hung in the air: ‘You’re not wanted here, let’s get this over with and send you all back to where you came from.’” The extraordinary apparatus of surveillance that rap audiences regularly confront also extends to the rap performers themselves. Because of their song, “Fuck tha Police,” NWA (Niggers with

Attitude) received an official reprimand from an assistant director of the FBI. In Detroit, NWA were driven off stage by dozens of armed police (and were later detained for questioning) for daring to perform the song in concert.

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Although Rose identifies the “shift in control over the scope and direction of the profit-making process, out of the hands of local black and Hispanic entrepreneurs and into the hands of larger, white-owned multinational businesses,” she is occasionally apologetic—defensive, even—of rap’s status as a commodity. She repeatedly reminds her reader that a preoccupation with the commodification of rap music would obscure the ways in which, given hip-hop’s highly politicized position in popular culture, the “cutting edge” can cut both ways. Hip-hop musicians are engaged in what Rose calls “a reclaiming of the definition of blackness and an attempt to retain aesthetic control over black cultural forms.” She is emphatic in her conviction that commercial success and cross-cultural (read: white) appeal have in no way diluted hip-hop’s function as “Black American TV” (a phrase she has “sampled” from a number of the rappers themselves, most notably Chuck D of Public Enemy), “a public and highly accessible place, where black meanings and perspectives—even as they are manipulated by corporate concerns—can be shared and validated among black people.”

It’s certainly true that hip-hop today is principally identified as a black cultural style, based upon African American (or Afro-diasporic) modes of creative expres-

sion and performance. This remains so even as rap's constitutive open-ended digital aesthetic continually spawns new hybrid forms, from acid jazz to hip-house and jungle music to industrial dance and world beat/hip-hop fusions. What is unclear is how this came to pass, given hip-hop's distinctly syncretic origins in the South Bronx street culture of the 1970s, already a vibrant mix of black and Puerto Rican. How is it that the commodification of hip-hop in the mass media so obviously prioritized its blackness, at the expense of its distinctive Latino attributes? This is the kind of question that Rose is not really prepared to explore because her own account is devoted to reinscribing rap music's blackness. The historical fact of a profound involvement by Puerto Ricans

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and other Caribbean Latinos in the early life of hip-hop is not altogether absent from *Black Noise*—Rose emphasizes hip-hop's mixed origins when making her argument against rap as strictly African retention. But her larger argument requires her to minimize the importance of this reality: "My arguments regarding Afro-diasporic cultural formations in hip hop," she insists, "are relevant to . . . Afro-diasporic cultures in the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, each of which has prominent and significant African-derived cultural elements. . . . Consequently, my references to Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities should in no way be considered inconsistent with my larger

Afrodiasporic claims." While it's perfectly true that the enslavement of Africans was a constitutive social fact of colonial societies throughout much of Latin America, Rose's erasure of the distinctly Latino presence in the formation of hip-hop amounts to an analytical blind spot—and, arguably, a kind of cultural chauvinism.

Nonetheless, it is probably true that, within the broader constellation of hip-hop culture, most of the original rap music performers were African American; by the mid-1980s, as rap became viable nationwide, it had been clearly identified as a black thing. One affinity with previous African American oral and musical traditions, Rose argues, relates to questions of address: "Black culture in the United States has always had elements that have been at least bifocal—speaking to both a black audience and a larger predominantly white context." Hence rappers are treated by a schizophrenic media as both prophets and thugs: recognized as preeminent social critics, pop-cultural public intellectuals (Rose describes how rappers were called upon to explain the Los Angeles uprising to an uncomprehending country—to function, in Rose's words, as "seeing eye dogs for a nation that had just realized it had gone blind"), while also stigmatized as social menaces and demagogues. (The frenzied condemnations of Ice-T's "Cop Killer," delivered by George Bush and sixty congressmen, and Bill Clinton's denunciation of rap publicist Sister Souljah are but two highest-profile examples.) As Rose rightly notes, the result of the proliferation of hip-hop style has been a "continued Afro-Americanization of contemporary commercial culture," simultaneously unnerv-

ing and revitalizing the wider American culture. That rap music's revisions and recuperations of blackness depend upon the overwhelmingly commodified character of that wider "American culture" goes without saying.

Tricia Rose's argument in *Black Noise* depends on the appropriate assertion that rap music "remains at the forefront of cultural and political skirmishes and retains its close ties to the poorest and least represented members of the black community." Its dialogic and improvisational character, she suggests, "seems especially suited for engaging many of the social contradictions and ambiguities that pertain specifically to contemporary urban working-class black life." She goes on to claim, however, that "for many young people [rap music and hip-hop culture] are the primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world" and "the central vehicle for open social reflection" on a vast array of social and political issues; "in short, it is black America's most dynamic contemporary popular cultural, intellectual, and spiritual vessel."

As Rose's claims become increasingly ambitious, however, she inadvertently reveals a tendency to subsume all of black America within a kind of spectacular cultural "contemporary," a cult of the "now" which is also a cult of youth. This kind of epistemological conceit is fairly pervasive in cultural studies, an insinuation about what is truly and irresistably "now," and, by implication, about all that is still to come . . . and all that is doomed to extinction. A similar, but more problematic, conceit is her use of "culture" as a somehow transparent or self-evident category. This is especially true when she makes commonsensical claims about

something called "black culture in contemporary America" (the book's subtitle). Elsewhere Rose is more cautious in identifying rap music's core audience as working-class black youth, which leads her, most notably, to criticize church-based anti-rap censorship campaigns within the black community for helping to cut off "the fragile links between today's working-class black youths and black middle-class religious and political leadership." In these passages she concedes the ways in which social class and generation are both critical fault lines at the base of black culture, often subversive of shared meanings and mutual understanding. Rose cites Mike Davis's remarks about the gang truce summit between Crips and Bloods in Los Angeles, shortly after the uprising: "They spoke in a rap rhythm and with rap eloquence. . . . [Hip-hop] is the fundamental matrix of self-expression for this whole generation."

To whatever extent Mike Davis's take is accurate, his writing is a great deal less impressionistic than similar claims made by Tricia Rose—for the simple reason that he actually refers to what some working-class black young people were actually saying. As much as one may feel predisposed to affirm the validity of Rose's claims about the centrality of rap music for interpreting and articulating the experiences of the majority of African American youth, the book never really substantiates these assertions. Rose argues that rap music is not merely a musical text but also "a communal African-American social discourse." As an illustration, she describes how the title and chorus of a rap song ("Who Protects Us from You?" by Boogie Down Productions) provided the discursive raw material with which a black

kid in New Haven was able to confront police harassment on the street. This is, however, the single instance where Rose provides such an account, and even here, she does not appear to have spoken to the participants. Although her interviews with various hip-hop insiders (her major informants for the book) are uniformly insightful, her method places limits on her ability to make compelling claims about the uses of rap music by African American youth. It is indubitably true, as Rose cites Angela Davis as saying, that “music has long permeated the daily life of most Af-

Adopting the rhetoric of ethnographic realism, Rose assumes the posture of cultural translator

rican-Americans; it has played a central role in the normal socialization process; and during moments characterized by intense movements for social change, it has helped to shape the necessary political consciousness.” But it is ultimately a far more intricate matter to demonstrate this proposition. In fact, Rose has overburdened her text with such ambitious claims about young black people’s “primary cultural, sonic, and linguistic windows on the world.”

It’s true, of course, that many of the rappers themselves (particularly in hip-hop’s nascent phase) came from urban working-class backgrounds and that their lyrics reflect their experiences. Rose makes the compelling point that rap’s primary thematic concerns—“identity and location”—represent an ongoing dialogue among rappers about their experiences of

what it means to be black “on the margins of postindustrial urban America.” The ghetto-centricity of rap music is grounded in a ghetto-specificity that informs how rappers come to speak for themselves and empower themselves to speak for their communities, as well. Rap’s poetics document the lived sense of location, in opposition to “most white popular cultural depictions of ghetto life [which] are drained of relevant detail, texture, and complexity.”

Unfortunately, Rose’s presentation of her interviews with hip-hop artists suffers from the same shortcoming. If her conversations yielded complex and textured perspectives from rappers on their social origins and how these are reflected in their music, it’s not apparent from the narrative of *Black Noise*. Similarly, although rap lyrics often provide provocative and explicit explorations of these same themes, Rose has transcribed relatively few; there are careful, extended readings of barely a handful of songs and videos.

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Adopting the rhetoric of ethnographic realism, Rose assumes the posture of a kind of cultural translator. Indeed, she informs us that she has “merged multiple ways of knowing, of understanding, of interpreting.” She introduces the book by forewarning her reader about the strange and exotic challenges of the subject: “What is at first unfamiliar and perhaps unintelligible is increasingly absorbed, and new ways of seeing and hearing become second nature.” But she also promises, “I hope that *Black Noise* rewards receptive readers similarly.” Given that “these unusually abundant polyvocal conversations

seem irrational [when taken out of context],” she describes what she understands to be her task in the book: “to produce a blueprint for understanding contemporary black popular cultural expression.” After all, hip-hop is, she claims, “a style nobody can deal with—a style that cannot be easily understood.” All this, despite the fact that rap music is perhaps one of the most articulate, explicit, and boldly outspoken lyrical genres in the history of American popular music. In *Black Noise*, one is led to believe that it is virtually incomprehensible without the mediation of the author.

In light of this quasi-ethnographic posture, it is fitting that Rose turns to a cultural anthropologist for one of her principal interpretive devices. Following James Scott’s position in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Rose argues:

Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion. These cultural forms are especially rich and pleasurable places where oppositional transcripts, or the “unofficial truths” are developed, refined, and rehearsed.

Against the dominant “public transcript,” she suggests, “rap music is, in many ways, a hidden transcript . . . a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless,” engaged in “symbolic and ideological warfare” with the powerful forces oppressing African Americans.

But this account of rap as “hidden transcript” must be squared with the peculiar fact that rap music is a cultural form

very much in the public eye. Rose suggests that rap music is entrenched in a pop-cultural war of position, with the frontier between the public and the hidden continually shifting. The ideologically subversive “unofficial truths” of hip-hop maneuver in the interstices of the music industry, between the contradictory imperatives of surveillance and profitability.

Rose’s analysis of this contested terrain is provocative. But because she relies upon the hidden transcript, she undercuts the force of her argument that “rap music, more than any other contemporary form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, ‘legitimate’ (neoliberal) ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality.” The point is precisely that rap is often quite articulate, explicit, even. By insisting on the hidden or inarticulate expression of rap’s politics, Rose privileges the position of cultural critic. Covert messages need a translator:

The experiences of domination and the hidden transcripts produced in relation to these experiences of domination are culturally coded and culturally specific. That is to say, although oppressed groups share common traits, oppression is experienced inside specific communities. Consequently, these hidden transcripts emerge not as overt cross-referential moments of protest but as culturally specific forms and expressions. They depend at some level on the addressed group’s having special access to meanings or messages and can assume the privileging of in-group experiences. Although they share traits with other forms of social protest, the language, style, form, and substance in rap music’s artic-

ulation of social protest are moments of black social protest. (*emphases added*)

Or rather, “it’s a black thing; you wouldn’t understand.” This, it seems, is the hidden transcript in *Black Noise*, the unofficial script that authorizes Rose to assume her self-assigned role as translator. All that was hidden will be revealed, “receptive readers” will be rewarded, and, given a good dose of esoteric knowledge, you will come to understand.

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Rap music’s rampant sampling demonstrates that commodified culture is inevitably public access; even as we are daily inundated with a torrent of mass-mediated images and scripts, everything is ultimately up for grabs in the ideological scimmages of everyday life. Hip-hop has been incredibly resourceful at making timely commentary on topical news items and contemporary public debates, due in large part to the music’s unique orientations to the organization of sound. Beyond the vintage soul and funk that make up rap’s rhythmic core, hip-hop samples almost all other genres of recorded music (past and present), as well as sound bites from popular cinema, television series, cartoons, commercials, radio talk shows, news broadcasts, and the recorded speeches of historic figures like Malcolm X, to create an intricate layering of references. In this way, Rose observes, rap music’s techniques for organizing sound also serve an archival function, by invoking a variety of historicities through a kind of “cultural archaeology.” Moreover, this linkage with the past revises past styles

and priorities for contemporary purposes, “a musical time machine . . . whereby old sounds and resonances can be embedded and recontextualized in the present.” Michael Eric Dyson has explored this insight in “Performance, Protest, and Prophecy in the Culture of Hip-Hop,” where he optimistically contemplates rap music and the revitalization of African American collective memory.

It is . . . refreshing to watch hip-hop culture revive an explicit historicism that combats the amnesia threatening to further consign the measured achievements of the recent Black past into disabling lapses of memory. Hip-hop has infused a revived sense of historical pride into young Black minds. . . . Rap music has also focused renewed attention on Black nationalist discourse and Black radical thought. . . . This renewed historicism permits young Blacks to discern links between the past and their own present circumstances, using the past as a fertile source of social reflection, cultural creation, and political resistance.

Tricia Rose makes a similar argument about hip-hop’s historicism, but she is never quite so explicit, because she appears unwilling to seriously engage the issue of black nationalism. Rose declares from the outset that “rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America,” and seems abundantly committed to the reinscription of rap music’s blackness. But with respect to black nationalism, there is an awkward silence at the heart of *Black Noise*.

By presenting so much of her analysis as the deciphering of hidden transcripts, Tricia Rose quite effectively conceals—thereby silencing—rap music’s most overt

articulations of racial politics. Rose readily admits to “ignoring some of the most highly publicized issues in rap music, as media attention on rap music has been based on extremist tendencies within rap, rather than the day-to-day cultural forces that enter into hip hop’s vast dialogue.” But under the rubric of “extremism,” she seems to include both the genre of gangster rap (about which she says virtually nothing in all of *Black Noise*) and any manifestation of radical black nationalism. This willingness to dismiss as extremist any political expression that is deemed too awkwardly explicit, finally, is a rhetorical move that trivializes radical critique and relegates to the margins the day-to-day *political* forces that enter vibrantly into Black America’s vast and urgent dialogue. It is easy enough to abstractly celebrate rap’s “counterhegemonic” interventions as “ideological insubordination”; but what is desperately needed is a serious and responsible engagement with the politics of popular culture—especially in the case of a cultural form which is as articulate as rap music.

When Rose does address the politics of rap, she makes the justified point that “confining the discussion of politics in rap to lyrical analysis addresses only the most explicit dimension of the politics of contemporary black cultural expression.” But it is equally insufficient to confine the discussion to the least explicit or visible dimensions of cultural politics without attending to that which is overtly political. In “Prophets of Rage,” the chapter of *Black Noise* devoted to “the politics of black cultural expression,” Rose provides a close and insightful reading of three songs. In two of them (BDP’s “Who Protects Us From You” and L. L. Cool J.’s

“Illegal Search”), indignant male rappers address themselves to racist police harassment and brutality, but neither captures the furious rage expressed in innumerable raps that celebrate collective African American retribution against police savagery. NWA’s “Fuck tha Police” is only the most famous of these militant and truly prophetic replies to the tyranny of everyday life in poor and working-class black communities. Rose relies upon NWA’s troubles with the authorities as an example of the institutional policing of hip-hop, but she never considers in any depth the content of “Fuck tha Police” or other raps like it, referring to them, condescendingly, as “revenge fantasies.”

Her third reading is more complicated. Rose’s analysis of Public Enemy’s “Night of the Living Baseheads” (the song and the video) is a deft reading of a complex critique, in words and images, of the powerful forces that perpetuate the drug trade in African American communities. Public Enemy has been widely recognized for the overtly nationalist content of their lyrics, especially after the release of their second album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, on which “Night of the Living Baseheads” appears. But this is nonetheless one of their earlier songs, and its message is deeply embedded in a dense weave of metaphor. Although she does a fine job of dissecting both the song and the video, Rose sidesteps Public Enemy’s more explicit politics by selecting an aesthetically ambitious song with a hidden transcript. In so doing, she evades the militancy and overt radicalism of Public Enemy’s more recent work on *Fear of a Black Planet* or *Apocalypse ’91 . . . The Enemy Strikes Black*. Furthermore, Public Enemy’s work is but one of the most notable

examples of black nationalist or Afrocentric hip-hop, a body of songwriting whose commentaries have interrogated virtually every imaginable political, economic, or social institution in the United States. These perspectives can hardly be written off as the obscure rantings of an “extremist tendency,” neither in black America

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at large nor in rap music, where they represent a rather central and sizable constituency.

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The sexual politics of rap is one of the highly publicized aspects of the music that Tricia Rose does choose to engage, exposing the selective and cynical public scrutiny of misogyny in hip-hop and making necessary linkages between sexist rap lyrics and sexism in society at large. Indeed, Rose’s attentive analysis of the contentious political terrain staked out between male and female rappers is exemplary. If her discussion of rap’s sexual politics inadvertently exposes what’s lacking in her discussion of rap’s racial politics, and if moreover she sometimes seems to reduce the scope of the politics of black rage to male rappers, Rose nonetheless makes a major contribution to the consideration of the often marginalized

voices of women in hip-hop. *Black Noise* confronts the sexism of many male rappers and explores the perspectives of prominent female rappers without making global statements about misogyny and feminism. Instead, Rose describes a contradictory dialogue about the politics of gender and sexuality in which nobody ever enjoys the first word, let alone the last, set against a backdrop of conflicted hetero-normative desires and fears. In this light, Rose indicts female rappers’ willingness to affirm oppressive paradigms of male (hetero)sexuality that sustain the fatal link between masculinity and patriarchal privilege as readily as she interrogates male rappers’ willingness to castigate women for participating in the disempowerment and oppression of black men.

Rose identifies three central themes in women’s rap: the precariousness of heterosexual courtship, the significance of women’s voices and views in hip-hop, and women’s physical and sexual freedom and self-determination. Drawing on detailed analyses of four songs and their videos (Salt ‘N’ Pepa’s “Tramp,” MC Lyte’s “Paper Thin,” Queen Latifah’s “Ladies First,” and Salt ‘N’ Pepa’s “Shake Your Thang”), Rose illustrates how women rappers air “private” concerns in the public square. In their reflections on the abuses perpetrated by men against women, Rose points out, these are not mournful ballads; “they are caustic, witty, and aggressive warnings directed at men and at other women who might be seduced by them in the future.” In these depictions of the power-charged dynamics of heterosexual relationships, women emerge as active and well-prepared participants with hard lessons to transmit. They often work

to disrupt masculinist preconceptions about female sexuality.

These women's raps commonly exhibit an irreverence toward moralistic constrictions on female sexual expression. Although these representations share the same hip-hop universe where women are reduced to objects for predatory masculinist consumption, Rose avers, they often refute the idea that women dress, or act, sexy in order to entice men. The centrality, self-possession, and explicit sexuality of black women's bodies are boldly affirmed in the lyrics and videos of female rappers. They offer a rebuke, as well, to

the American tradition that stigmatized the black female body. Throughout "Bad Sistas," her chapter on women's rap, Rose cogently and persuasively reviews the ways that female rappers affirm black working-class women's expressions and experiences where they are otherwise invisible. She also notes how women's raps recontextualize African American racial claims in order to assert black women's political priorities. Rose clearly demonstrates the importance of critical gendered analyses of popular culture and reaffirms the need to sustain a female claim to public space and representation.