

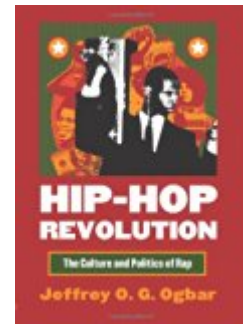
H-Net Reviews

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Jeffrey Ogonna Green Ogbar. *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. 236 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1547-6.

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The Really Real: Terms of Authenticity in Rap Music

In *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar writes as one who struggles to love hip-hop while moving it forward through critique. The chapters are thematically organized by prominent debates surrounding rap music, which he uses to unpack the discourse of race, to a lesser extent gender, notions of “realness,” and the terms of authenticity. His work focuses on the expanse of these debates rather than their depth, leaving several critical holes but aptly illustrating the constricted nature of blackness in the play of authenticity.

Ogbar begins his work by aligning hip-hop with other forms of racialized cultural production in the United States, demonstrating their inextricable link to earlier representations of black pathology. Chapter 1 opens with a look at popular representations of minstrelsy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the black anti-hero in 1970s black exploitation cinema. These twinned figures fundamentally shape hip-hop, combining to become “the real nigga”—the most commercially and financially viable rap figure for white and non-white audiences alike. Ogbar makes the connection to commercialization, but goes no further than to say, “The cause of this historical myopia stems chiefly from the marketing of hip-hop” (p. 41).

The next two chapters are about race and gender respectively. Ogbar argues that the public use (or absence) of “nigga” by non-black MCs in their rhymes is for the first time chiefly on black people’s terms, even without

their unwavering consensus. This use marks the confluence of black agency and the commercialization of black pathology in performances of rebel authenticity in hip-hop. Ogbar discusses Latino, Asian American, and white MCs but misses multiple opportunities to flesh out the first two in what reads like a rush to whiteness. For example, he hastily concludes that blacks and Latinos share an essential comradery made evident by black audience’s acceptance of Latino male MCs’ ubiquitous use of “nigga.” This argument illustrates the glaring absence of Raquel Rivera’s *New York Ricans in the Hip Hop Zone* (2003), a work that delves into the often strained relationship between African Americans and Puerto Ricans. And while few works on rap acknowledge Asian American MCs, Ogbar again abbreviates the analysis, leaving me to wonder how Asian artists represent themselves within the confines of narrow configurations of hip-hop authenticity despite their lack of mainstream popularity. Thus the bulk of the chapter is dedicated to white MCs’ negotiations of black stereotypes. He argues that they traverse a terrain circumscribed by narrow ideas of blackness to which their access is always limited, probationary, and undergirded by hostile responses for “intolerable infractions,” such as in Eminem’s reference to blacks as “nig-gas” in his early “lost tapes” (p. 66).

Ogbar successfully expands the discourse of good and bad images of women in hip-hop by focusing on female MCs whose public personas and rhymes tout neither extreme of “soft femininity or being one-of-the-boys” (p. 103). He concludes that there is a diverse community of

women performers and more spaces for work as actors and models as a result (p. 98). But when coupled with the reality of video models who are in the forefront of rap's marketability, women rappers have a force stronger than their collectivity to contend with. His troubling oversimplification fails to acknowledge the precariousness of video modeling and the unlikelihood of it leading to bigger and better things for more than a lucky few.

Chapter 4, "Rebels with a Cause: Gangstas, Militants, Media, and the Contest for Hip-Hop," is about the moral panic over rap music, what he calls the culture wars, and the hypocrisies they highlight. Particular attention is given to accusations of rap's indecency and its correlation to the downfall of today's youth. Ogbar uses statistics on the rising rate of graduate degrees, the drop in teen pregnancies over the last twenty years, and increased political awareness of youth to challenge characterizations of young blacks as passive, uncritical listeners. These characterizations become ridiculous in the absence of any clear relationship between such statistics and rap on either side of the debate. Simply put, while no one would credit rap for the reported successes, somehow critics can blame rap for large-scale social problems.

Ogbar ends the work with a chapter on changing lyrical trends. The thrust of "Locked Up: Police, the Prison Industrial Complex, Black Youth, and Social Control" challenges criticisms of cop-killer storylines versus the utter silence about those on black-on-black violence. "Following nationally coordinated protests to court cases and pressure from music label, the violent thrust of hardcore rappers shifted focus from killing the police to killing other black people.... Moreover, as violent narratives about killing black people ... expanded, rap songs explored the prison complex, but largely as a code of honor or a thug rite of passage" (p. 156). The shift in lyrical content both comes out of sociopolitical forces and begins to breed new debates, all within the confines of realness. The importance of *Hip-Hop Revolution* is ex-

emplified in this chapter as he demonstrates how authenticity shifts within both the scope of these larger debates and the limitation of black stereotypes.

At the same time, the work falls short at the convergence of experience and representation. Ogbar walks a thin line between lyrics as truth and as artistic play. So much weight is put on what rappers say that little analysis is directed toward the music's production in its totality. While hip-hop plays in the realm of verisimilitude in public performances, gangster rappers more than most artists are forced to *be* their work. But knowing that these demands come from the market *and from within* hip-hop should complicate his analysis and challenge the status quo because such lyrics indicate a great deal of room for play. For example, Ogbar highlights what he sees as the ironic contradiction of college-educated MCs who grew up middle class and now live fairly stable home lives with wives and children of their own despite self-representations as the most dangerous thugs. But it is only ironic and contradictory if we give credence to the demand that they cannot be that and gangsta rappers too in the first place. These are the limits of lyrical analysis.

There is a growing body of hip-hop scholarship that purposefully moves away from lyrical analysis, focusing methodologically on field work, archival research, and critical cultural analyses, including Joe Schloss's *Making Beats* (2004), Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* (2005), James Spady's *The Global Ciph*a (2006), and Halifu Osumare's *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop* (2008). Ogbar dabbles in but does not fully execute any of these methods. While not always adding something new Ogbar manages to simplify (sometimes overly so) hip-hop's most salient debates and locates how authenticity and realness become determining forces. Although several points demand much greater attention, this book is a primer for those wanting to delineate these themes, making it a solid resource for undergraduate classes.

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