

**Book Review: James Braxton Peterson, *Hip-Hop Headphones: A Scholar's Critical Playlist*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. ISBN: 978-1501308246 (Paperback). 296 Pages. \$29.95.**

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Since its pioneering stages during the 1990s the field of Hip Hop Studies has made steady progression. Breakthrough works such as Houston Baker's *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (1993) and Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* (1994) examined hip hop culture with nuance and verve and, importantly, a knowledgeable perspective. Along with the emergence of prolific "hip hop intellectuals" such as Michael Eric Dyson, Mark Anthony Neal and Joan Morgan, to name a few, such efforts not only expounded upon the particulars of hip hop culture but crucially created paths of investigation in which issues of race, gender and class stratification endemic to all of American society could be better understood.

Embodying both the fierce intellect of his predecessors and promoting the marriage of hip hop culture and education is James Braxton Peterson, professor of English and director of Africana Studies at Lehigh University. For Peterson, this "marriage" is already embedded into the very fabric of hip hop culture, its history, structure and modus operandi; it is we academics who have often posed indifferent to youth culture and must endeavor ourselves to be brave, bold and studied enough to come to the party. With the hopes of becoming a "staple resource for all

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educators who are interested in and committed to teaching the history, artistry and culture of Hip Hop at all levels of education”, Braxton’s newest book, *Hip-Hop Headphones: A Scholar’s Critical Playlist* is an invitation to interested scholars- an almost “how-to” manual to jump start inquiry in the field. In addition, the text serves as depository of essential tools of the trade: hip-hop syllabi, purposefully themed playlists and an extensive bibliography and annotations all provide meaningful direction to exploration of hip hop culture in the classroom.

As Peterson notes, beyond publications, Hip Hop Studies (or #HipHopEd to the cognoscenti) “has developed via the dual pressures of Hip-Hop Generational scholars entering the academy as as graduate students and more recently as professors and the steady pressure, interest, and inclinations of younger Hip Hop generational students who continue to find Hip-Hop-related courses of vital interest in their graduate studies.” (26) Indeed, in the past ten years, hip hop has made its presence felt in the hallowed halls of Harvard with its Hiphop Archive and Research Institute and most certainly the classroom where hip hop culture cross pollinates with the disciplines of English, history, political science, religion and philosophy, sociology and anthropology, not to mention music, performance theater and the arts. Duke University has even tapped the talents of renowned hip hop beat maker, 9<sup>th</sup> Wonder as an adjunct instructor. Apparently, knowledge reigns supreme over nearly everyone.

And not unlike other disciplines, there are recommended- if not required- methodologies Peterson suggests to organize pedagogy and learning. Foremost, the author advocates “critical listening” a tact he aligns with “critical thinking”; a deliberate effort to use our ears and intellect to tune in to hip hop music’s multilayered texts that are most easily evidenced in rap lyrics but can also be found in video imaging, marketing and popular discourses interacting with the culture in news and social media and the academy. Peterson’s reasoning for taking hip hop music seriously cites the culture and its practitioners prescient ability to identify and chronicle America’s complex social problems: the challenges of a post industrialized economy for the working poor, the travails of urban ecology, limited access to educational and employment opportunities and failed and devastating Wars on Poverty, Drugs and Terrorism.

Any close listen to the loosely defined (and oft disputed) canon of hip hop recordings in its four decades of existence will reveal an ideological script many intellectuals, pundits and politicians are now just awakening to. For example, Peterson cites a 2002 acoustic performance of Grammy

Award winner Lauryn Hill's song "The Mysteries of Iniquity" where Hill deftly indicts an unchecked and aggressive criminal justice system that has produced a disproportionate representation of people of color. Hill's poetics identify a modern day oppression of American citizenry comparable to institutional slavery. This is a decade before phrases like "The New Jim Crow" were hashtagged or President Obama invoked the image of the "School to Prison Pipeline" in a 2015 speech. Peterson is effectively arguing critical listening of hip hop lyrics are not simply some "mirror reflection" of life but a complex, prophetic, sometimes contradictory polemic, embodying both a vision for self and society. The capability of a hip hop lyricist to interweave personal identity and choice while describing seemingly fated macro forces provides an illustrative and nuanced lens to the devastating experiences of racism and classism, shattering neo-liberal ideals of liberty and freedom. Or as the masked emcee MF DOOM intoned in 1999, "Only in America could you find a way to earn a healthy buck and still keep your attitude on self-destruct".

Peterson provides means for students (and scholars) to "move beyond the discussions of 'who's your favorite rapper'" by providing critical listening and pedagogical strategies "that operate (or can be operational) with an implicit sense of the intrinsic value of Hip-Hop culture within education." Most straightforward is a Categorical Rubric the author outlines; a 5 point formula for measuring a hip hop artist's impact by variables such as lyrical flow, artistic persona and historical knowledge. Recognizing the Socratic like debates which originate in barbershops, chatrooms and street corners, Peterson is championing hip hop teachers, journalists and students to utilize the rubric to "transform arbitrary flat discussions about 'favorites' and 'bests' into a more comprehensive conversations about aesthetics, location, and mastery of/in performance." (48) Further guidelines are found in Peterson's discussion of "B-Boy Rules for Hip-Hop Scholars" a prescription of directives largely inspired by Harold Cruse's 1967 seminal work *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Hip hop intellectuals are implored to thoroughly familiarize themselves with hip hop history, its internal ideological struggles, remain both an advocate and critic to advance the culture and to acknowledge the uniqueness of the African American experience.

Chapters in which Peterson flexes these techniques make for compelling examples of the extent hip hop scholarship can illuminate academic discourse on class, race and gender. Well known recordings of hip hop artists such as Notorious B.I.G.'s 1994 "Juicy" or lesser known but important works such as "What They Do" of the Philadelphia band The Roots from 1996 illustrate the commonality and conflicts existing

within a hip hop playlist. The former martyred Brooklyn rapper B.I.G.'s lyrics embody the themes of "the Horatio Alger mythology or the ideals of some rugged American individualism"- a tried and tested marketable "pop cultural narrative for mainstream America" according to Peterson. Whereas Black Thought, lead MC/vocalist of The Roots offers a critique of hip hop music's at large embrace of conspicuous consumption, a fetish of materialism that did not go unchecked. Peterson carries the critical theme of the Roots "What They Do" a step further, noting without irony that "a form of Black culture that emerged from economically challenged circumstances served as a soundtrack to the materialistic follies of Wall Street and the mainstream middle class." (78)

The author's strength is assisting readers- truly, listeners- to transcend deterministic analysis of hip hop culture. We are implored to recognize the discursive nature of individual artistry and the geographical and historical variance of how hip hop practitioners are socialized into their trade. With such an expansive view, the postmodernity of racial dynamics of hip hop's origins and its practices of graffiti writing, DJing, breakdancing and MCing become apparent. Readers are also asked to account for socio-economic environments but to not end analysis there; "the relationships between author and narrative are not necessarily autobiographical" in hip hop music but a fluid representation of "certain postindustrial, inner-city African-American realities."

Further, hip hop intellectuals should exercise the considerable agency at their command within academia. Hip hop "has a story" Peterson proclaims, a story his work efforts to resonate "in and with the community"; either in classrooms, public forums or private prisons, "the task for Hip-Hop scholars/educators is to work with students to develop their knowledge of the culture, especially their sense of the historical narratives that might reframe their experiences with rap music." (43) Most necessarily, Peterson calls for "expanding scholarly discourses on women's subjectivity in Hip-Hop culture" and for Hip Hop scholars to "make important womanist interventions into the ultra-masculinists discourses in mainstream Hip-Hop culture." (54)

Such wide ranging concepts of hip hop scholarship would be difficult to definitively and declaratively establish in one book. But this is not the author's aim. From the first sentence of the introduction, the unwieldy nature of *Hip Hop Headphones* is acknowledged as "a chaotic collection of definitions, essays, reviews, articles, round tables and public talks mostly related to Hip-Hop culture". In the parlance of hip hop DJ culture, this book is a mixtape; or to better align with today's technology and Peterson's purpose, it is a playlist of exciting expositions and carefully

deliberated theories. Much like his 2014 work *The Hip-Hop Underground and African American Culture*, the author's voice and passion are palatable throughout, effortlessly providing insightful analysis and context to well-chosen examples of hip hop music and its history. However, as this book shifts into shorter specific essays, documentary and book reviews, the thematic thread of the work becomes elusive. While all are examples of the very scholarship Peterson champions some tangents lose the momentum of the whole. In particular, a published roundtable discussion of scholars on "Race Theory and Gender in Hip Hop's Global Future" evidence Peterson excellent ability to moderate a panel, but something is lost in reading the out loud casual ruminations of intellectuals on paper; you had to be there maybe. Lastly, there are moments where the book feels rushed, where careful editing would provide accurate endnotes and the breakup of run on paragraphs could ensure the undergraduate student will remain engrossed.

But these relatively minor shortcomings do not overshadow the great gift Peterson has provided hip hop scholars and educators. In addition, to the book's collection of resources of syllabi, playlists and references, chapters examining the epistemology of a hip hop intelligence and philosophy ("Best Never Heard: Playlist Pedagogy in the Hip-Hop Classroom" and "Rewriting the Remix: College Composition and the Educational Elements of Hip Hop") are jump off points for further research and classroom discourse. With its brief overview of the history of hip hop intellectualism, the epilogue in of itself is a treatment for a book in waiting. So as such *Hip Hop Headphones* is admittedly a "point of entry" for issues around Hip Hop Studies, issues heretofore have not been definitively addressed since Houston Baker's 1993 breakthrough pronouncement for the need of serious scholarly inquiry into hip hop culture. But unlike two decades ago, we are no longer awaiting the arrival of Hip Hop Studies; the horse is out of the barn or the record is already playing, so to speak, and Peterson has provided the critical means to get down with the get down.

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