

*The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop.* By Murray Forman. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002. Pp. xxvii + 387, ISBN 0-8195-6397-8, pbk.)

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***The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop.*** By Murray Forman. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002. Pp. xxvii + 387, ISBN 0-8195-6397-8, pbk.)

In 1963, LeRoi Jones made the following comment in *Blues People*: “It is impossible to say simply, ‘Slavery created blues’, and be done with it — or at least it seems almost impossible to make such a statement and sound intelligent saying it”(50). Avoiding oversimplification, Jones implied that social history was not the only factor to be considered in any serious analysis of the genre, and that blues resulted from an intricate combination of intertwined contextual influences that needed to be taken into account through a multidimensional approach. In *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, where he examines the articulation of this triad in the discourse of rap and hip-hop, Murray Forman, adopting an analogous analytical perspective, demonstrates convincingly to what extent rap music and satellite cultural practices and expressive productions (break-dancing, graffiti) are the products of a multifaceted sociohistorical and geocultural matrix that prevails largely in high density urban localities inhabited predominantly by African-Americans and other cultural minorities.

Concentrating his study on rap and hip-hop’s distinct emphasis on what he calls the “extreme local”, a refinement of the spatial scale which concurs with the postmodern shift from master narrative / *grande histoire* to micro narrative / *petite histoire* emphasized by French theorist Jean François Lyotard (xvii), Forman enlightens the recurrence of place references in rap lyrics and videos by detailed decoding. For instance, his treatment of Will Smith’s video “*Freakin’ it*” shows how the production abounds with signifiers of Philadelphia’s cultural landscape (its basketball team, architectural landmarks) meant to concentrate viewer attention on the scenery and urban terrain that constitute the rapper’s “home” (xxi).

Drawing on earlier scholarly observations on rap and hip-hop (Tricia Rose, Paul Gilroy and David Toop) and the work of cultural theorists (David Harvey, Arjun Appadurai), Forman explores the geocultural and spatial origins of the genre’s developmental trajectory (chapter 1), and from an appropriate theoretically conceived angle, analyzes the evolution of a distinctive spatial discourse within rap and hip-hop culture that describes significant social and cultural issues. He explains, for example, how rap recordings dealing with sociopolitical concerns

or spatially oriented themes (growing up in poverty-stricken areas, drug related issues...) that became known as “message rap”, “knowledge rap” or “reality rap”, are indebted to “The Message” (1982) by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five that shifted rap music toward an incisive critical content. Supported by Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy’s exploration of the reactionary and neoliberal discursive project, which criminalizes a portion of the African-American youth, Forman examines the connotations and implications of discursively constructed “space-myths” attributed to a “ghettocentric” sensibility, such as “inner city”, “ghetto” and “hood”, and significantly demonstrates how they epitomize “authenticity” in the counter-discourse of rappers (chapters 2 and 3).

At the core of Forman’s study also lies a detailed analysis of the different landmarks of the evolution of rap music as an industry (chapters 4-9), from its inception to the crossover endeavour that brought it to a mainstream audience through a process that Elizabeth Blair calls “transfunctionalism”, synonymous with a dilution of its specific cultural aesthetic. Providing informative insights that supplement existing scholarship dealing with the history of this music, such as *Droppin’ Science* by William Eric Perkins, *Signifying Rappers* by Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace, and *The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap* by Jon Michael Spencer, Forman demonstrates his expertise in communication studies. Thus he innovatively revisits the history of rap and hip-hop, addressing the role of the hip-hop press and hip-hop cinema in the mass media dissemination of the music, as well as the ambiguous attitudes of radio, television, and even insurance companies and their impact on the growth of the music. He interestingly explains how insurance companies, convinced that this music fostered violence, raised their fees for any rap act, thus constraining the genre’s geographical growth.

Forman’s book constitutes an extremely valuable contribution to the scholarly study of rap music. His rigorous analysis combines appropriate theory with a well-organized array of useful data. En toto, this volume constitutes an excellent complement to the existing literature on the subject. However, one regrets the lack of references to the cultural input of the African-American oral and musical traditions, which would have bolstered his coverage, particularly for a comprehensive understanding of the continuity of certain themes and imagery in rap. A deeper examination of African-American and Mexican-American cultural practices of urban folklore based on the

work of folklorists, ethnographers and linguists, would have enhanced his analysis. References to *From Trickster to Badman* by folklorist John W. Roberts and to *Talkin' and Testifyin'* by linguist Geneva Smitherman, for example, would have balanced his approach to “gangsta” imagery and emphasized the “play” element in rap lyrics.

In conclusion, one might note that even though Murray Forman’s analysis thoroughly explains how “race” is an ideologically biased discursive construct, and demonstrates to what extent “Members of America’s minority populations have become major casualties in the discursive, symbolic, and physical violence perpetrated by political and cultural authorities” (53), he nevertheless maintains a similar damaging rhetoric emphasizing tenuous distinctions through his recurrent use of the highly charged connotative adjectives “black” and “white”. In *Culture of Intolerance*, Mark Nathan Cohen regrets that even though the unsubstantiated character both of the term “race”, and of the classification of people by colour can be found in any introductory textbook in physical anthropology or human genetics, this distinction is still insidiously customary in our public discourse. Should it also be prevalent in academic discourse?

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