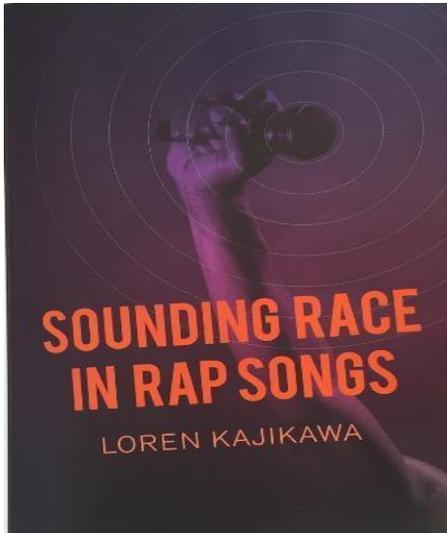




## Sounding Race in Rap Songs

Loren Kajikawa

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Reviewed by Camilla Fascina<sup>1</sup>

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2015, Michael Render, a.k.a. “Killer Mike,” was invited to talk at “The Tavis Smiley Show,” discussing a number of topics ranging from Nina Simone’s legacy and race relations in America to the public’s acceptance of rap.

Killer Mike, apart from being a prolific rapper, is also an influential activist and his music is meant not only for entertainment, but also as a tool of protest. During the interview at “The Tavis Smiley Show,” after sharing his thoughts on the cost of forgiveness as a follow-up consideration after the Charleston Shooting,<sup>2</sup> Killer Mike stated “You can’t argue that hip-hop rots away the moral character of kids or rots their brain and still see middle class white kids going to college who are listening to hip-hop.”<sup>3</sup>

It is, to some extent, this same spirit that drives Loren Kajikawa to write *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, an insightful contribution to the discussion about rap as a corrosive influence and a cause of violence.

In fact, the book opens with Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,”<sup>4</sup> a song commissioned by film director Spike Lee for *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee 1989),<sup>5</sup> and charged of inciting violence.

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<sup>2</sup> As [cbsnews.com](http://cbsnews.com) reports, the night of June 17, 2015 “a white man opened fire in a historic black church, in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine people including a pastor, during a prayer meeting. The suspect, Dylann Roof, was arrested in North Carolina and extradited to South Carolina June 18, 2015 for what authorities are calling a hate crime.” In fact, Roof later confessed that he committed the shooting in the hope of igniting a race war.

<sup>3</sup> <http://pitchfork.com/news/60205-killer-mike-talks-race-relations-nina-simone-public-acceptance-of-rap-on-the-tavis-smiley-show/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PaoLy7PHwk>.

<sup>5</sup> The movie sheds light on racial tensions in a Brooklyn neighborhood.



Kajikawa's aim is to explore the relationship between rap music and racial representations through the study of the processes behind the production of hit songs by various hip-hop artists in order to investigate how hip-hop and rap produce musical identity.<sup>6</sup> The author's choice of analyzing individual hit singles proves to be a really good one, since each song produces particular ideas about race and genre. In Kajikawa's words:

this book seeks to demonstrate how specific songs enable listeners to make arguments about race. (...) In the 1980s and 1990s, influential artists including The Sugarhill Gang, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Run-D.M.C., Public Enemy, N.W.A., Dr. Dre, and Eminem all worked in a commercial genre understood as "black", but they provided listeners with varying interpretations of what race could sound like. (Kajikawa 9)

Back to Spike Lee's choice of using Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," Kajikawa analyzes this single in order to underline how the sound of that song plays an important role in the construction of the movie's meaning. As a matter of fact, in *Do the Right Thing*, the song "Fight the Power" plays loudly on Radio Raheem's boombox as he enters Sal's pizzeria together with Buggin' Out.

A confrontation follows, ending with Sal bashing Raheem's radio with his baseball bat until the music stops. A fight ensues that spills out into the street where it is witnessed by a crowd of spectators.

On this basis, Kajikawa reports that music reviewers and journalists charged Public Enemy's song of being incendiary and brutal, of being "the sound of urban alienation and violent tendencies to be read mainly as black anger" (Kajikawa 2). This statement, stemming mainly from white media and white press, clearly undergirds the view of black music as dangerous and hostile, as Killer Mike pointed out in the above mentioned interview.

Kajikawa's considerations have the merit of proving how music makes the issue of race audible. Such a process is described in the book as "sounding race."

Furthermore, by stigmatizing the socioeconomic reasons for criminality in black youth (such as joblessness, drug addiction, and violence), leading to verbal protests against police and political violence as well, Kajikawa clears space to understand the ideals and values of the growing rap culture.

In this respect, in the section called "Compton as Confrontation and Contestation," Kajikawa offers an incisive description of the reasons why "Straight Outta Compton"<sup>7</sup> (1988) by N.W.A. embodies the sense of entrapment felt by African Americans living in South Central Los Angeles both musically and visually (much importance in the analysis of this song is in fact given to its music video).

In the video, Kajikawa notes, N.W.A.'s members are filmed while walking on foot, emphasizing their proximity to the street and their connection to the place, whereas their LAPD adversaries always drive in police cars. The members of the band thus become easy targets for the police, who eventually lock them up inside a police van. In the video, urban space becomes a place of conflict and the image of the map, which returns as the song's chorus breaks in again, highlights the circumscribed area of Compton and the "sense of surveillance and limited mobility felt by its inhabitants" (Kajikawa 98). Spatial relations and the police' oppressive presence are thus underlined both by sound and imagery. Once again, it is self-evident how music relies on racial codes to convey its meanings, and how rap manages to make race audible – *Sounding Race*, indeed.

What can be noticed, however, is the fact that also the band's members portray themselves as dominant aggressors. As Kajikawa underlines, "N.W.A.'s 'Straight Outta Compton' begins with a verse from Ice Cube describing himself as a 'crazy motherfucker' with a 'sawed off' shotgun who will destroy anyone who gets in his way: 'squeeze the trigger, and bodies are hauled off' (Kajikawa 101).

Again, as it was the case of Public Enemy's music, does hip-hop cause violence, or merely reflect a violent ghetto? The debate is still open, as Tricia Rose explains in *The Hip-Hop Wars* where she brilliantly discusses, among other things, how hip-hop has become increasingly saturated with blames of being a source of violence.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai3HY0Kc95g>.



Kajikawa's book stands as a significant contribution to this controversy and it is in line with Tricia Rose's theory of hip-hop being considered the primary means by which we talk about race in the United States. As an evidence of Kajikawa's considerations, it is worth noting how N.W.A.'s song<sup>8</sup> has paved the way for open confrontations against LAPD in music. In fact, many other groups after them have taken on such a socio-political engagement, as for example the hip-hop duo Psycho Realm.<sup>9</sup> As N.W.A. before them, also Psycho Realm's members denounce the police' oppressive presence by documenting LAPD's deadly use of force and repression. In this respect, scholar Clyde Woods argues that "hip-hop, like its predecessor - the blues- has served as a tradition of investigation, interpretation and social critique that groups such as the Psycho Realm have embodied (Woods 33). Psycho Realms lyrics, by bringing to light experiences of moral panic and crisis in Central American and Mexican migrant community, testify to the long history of racialized class violence in Los Angeles. As it can be inferred from their lyrics, the duo openly denounces LAPD's brutal use of violence: "The master plan don't include us, so they shoot us."<sup>10</sup> This lyrics recall N.W.A.'s famous lines of "Straight Outta Compton": "Here's a murder rap to keep yo dancing/ with a crime record like Charles Manson/ AK-47 is the tool"<sup>11</sup> where N.W.A compare LAPD's violence to that of racist killer Charles Manson. As a matter of fact, the criminal believed in an impending apocalyptic war between blacks and whites where the black

would kill all of the whites (except for Manson and his 'family' who would be hiding in the bottomless pit by then). Manson states that the problem with the blacks in control is that they wouldn't know what to do because all they've ever known how to do was what 'whitey' tole 'em to. So they would seek out Charlie in the bottomless pit and make him king of the world.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the book's focus is completely up-to-date to the tendencies coming from the big screen. Recently, the movie *Straight Outta Compton* (2015)<sup>13</sup> by director F. Gary Gray has been released. It is an American biographical drama telling the story of the rise and fall of N.W.A. and how they revolutionized hip-hop culture. The film clearly borrows its name from the title of N.W.A.'s debut studio album, and from the album's title track (which has been previously mentioned when discussing its relation to the LAPD). Furthermore, Kajikawa discusses rap's ideological dimension in relation both to the concept of "color-blindness" and to the concept of race as a social construct. For what "color-blindness" concerns, Kajikawa adopts Anthony Kwame Harrison's perspective that regards hip-hop as the means through which "young people have constructed their own standards of belonging and authenticity that render rigid notions of race obsolete. By mastering hip-hop's formal elements and knowledge of its history, young black, Asian, Latino,

<sup>8</sup> See what Kurtis Blow says about N.W.A.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67SCPVe2-JM&sns=em>.

<sup>9</sup> I have been working on the translation of the article "Sounds from the Belly of the Beast: Rampart Police (Dis)Order and the Psycho Realm Blues" by Steven Osuna for *Ácoma - Rivista Internazionale di Studi Nord-Americani* 6 (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Lyrics taken from Psycho Realm "Conspiracy Theory" released in the album *A War Story Book I* (1999).

<sup>11</sup> Lyrics taken from "Straight Outta Compton" by N.W.A (1988).

<sup>12</sup> This belief is called by Manson "Helter Skelter," a term which he takes from the Beatles' song carrying the same name. Manson, in fact, believed that the Beatles spoke to him through their lyrics. Thus, he reinterpreted the Beatle's lines by creating his own new version of the Beatles' song. In Manson's mind, "Helter Skelter" would metaphorically relate to a race war: "Blackie won't know what to do after he's killed whitey, so he'll seek us out. When he finds us he'll be like 'massah, we don't know what to do' and I'll take blackie by the hand and rub his wooley little head and say 'it'll all be okay' and they'll make me their king" (Bugliosi 238-245). See also: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Helter+Skelter> and <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/manson/mansonbeatles.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *Straight Outta Compton* is not the first movie on hip-hop. Before it, many other productions celebrated and narrated the hip-hop scene. Among the most famous it is worth remembering *8 Mile* (Curtis Hanson 2002) featuring Eminem, Kim Basinger e Brittany Murphy, or *Boyz 'N the Hood* (John Singleton 1991) featuring Cuba Gooding Jr., Ice Cube and Laurence Fishburne. Or, again, *Juice* (1992) by film director Ernest R. Dickerson, starring Omar Epps and Tupac Shakur; *Friday* (1995), by director F. Gary Gray with Ice Cube; or *Notorious B.I.G.* (2009) by George Tillman Jr.



and white rappers find common ground and create new forms of community” (Kajikawa 152). Even though Harrison carefully signals that race continues to be salient and problematic when talking about hip-hop, he also points out that hip-hop is for its practitioners a meritocratic field, very much like jazz before it, since also in hip-hop “status” is awarded by skills<sup>14</sup> and achievement alone (as might be noted in the case of white hip-hop artist Eminem).

“Color-blindness” in hip-hop is thus perceived thanks to this discipline’s inherent openness to anyone who can demonstrate significant mastery of its formal elements, appealing and hailing fans and practitioners from all ethnic backgrounds. In support of this hypothesis, Kajikawa reports Joseph Schloss’ critical approach in *Making Beats: the Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* where Schloss declares his will not to give emphasis to the ethnic and racial identities of rap’s informants as part of a larger statement about the racial politics of hip-hop studies. Schloss, in fact, states that his decision to shift his critical gaze away from race is not made in order to promote a naive universalism, but to shed light on aspects of the music (and people who produce it) that “become invisible when scholars assume that racial politics explains everything about hip-hop” (Kajikawa 152).

However, if in some cases race can prove to be problematic and even unproductive for the analysis of hip-hop, it is also true that Schloss’ approach runs the risk of presenting an oversimplified view of reality. Better expressed in Spike Lee’s words during an interview with Jason Solomons for *The Guardian*: “Anyone who thinks we move in a post-racial society is someone who’s been smoking crack.”<sup>15</sup>

What can be noted, however, is that rap as a genre is a dynamic and powerful means that can “project multiple and contradictory ideas about race and reality (Kajikawa 6).

For what the concept of race as a social construct concerns, Kajikawa grounds his analysis on the theories of social scientists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who define race as “an unstable and ‘de-centered’ complex of social meanings, constantly being transformed through a political process they term ‘racial formation’” (Kajikawa 6). Omi and Winant refer to ‘racial formation’ as the sociohistorical process by which “racial meanings are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Kajikawa 153).

Even though rap music continues to cross lines of race, class and nation, it must never be forgotten that issues of social and political identity are always at stake. Rap music’s first two decades (1980-1990), in fact, were deeply influenced by the post-civil rights atmosphere characterized by racial tensions, divisions, and inequalities.

At the end of the book the author reasserts his intention to analyze only examples of rap music in the circumscribed period of the first decades of the twenty-first century; however, Kajikawa’s *Sounding Race* opens up the possibility to apply his critical approach to the newest developments of rap’s relation to the concept of race, as it is the case with Macklemore’s approach on intercultural and interracial music,<sup>16</sup> or ASAP Rocky’s development towards ignoring race,<sup>17</sup> or Tayler the Creator’s approach to masculinity, sexuality and race.<sup>18</sup> These are just some verified examples of dozens of possible developments. Interestingly enough, Kajikawa’s great contribution to the discussion about race in rap songs lies in the fact that he develops a critical new approach that could be applied to other follow-up case studies which, although not present in his book, deal with race in rap songs as well and give stimulating insights in today’s view of race in rap culture.

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<sup>14</sup> For what the “skills” of the artists concerns, see Ice-T interview at the Art of Rap Festival (7-18-2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1t4K5vzFfo&sns=em>.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2009/oct/05/spike-lee-do-the-right-thing>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdVRIM-kSx8>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/aap-rocky-on-acting-in-dope-the-joy-of-drugs-and-why-he-doesnt-care-about-racism-10480008.html>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6lxQ6JwIVY&feature=youtu.be>.



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